A Guide to

Critical Senior Theses in English

(ENGL 700)

Academic Year 2026-2027

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Preparing to Write the Thesis: A Timeline

A Senior thesis is required only of ENGL seniors pursuing departmental graduation Honors, although completion of a thesis does not guarantee honors. Any eligible student may write a thesis, which involves independent critical reading and writing at the highest level. If you plan to write a critical thesis, these guidelines are for you.

- **April of junior year**: If you plan to write your project in the Fall, contact potential faculty members with whom you might like to work to see who is available to advise your thesis. Once you have chosen an advisor, register in Banner for your advisor's section of ENGL 700. Talk with your advisor about your project and develop a reading list for the summer. For certain projects, you and your advisor may consider adding a "research term" (for ENGL 500 credit) to allow you to do more research in advance of your thesis semester.

- **November of senior year:** If you plan to write your project in the Spring, contact potential faculty members with whom you might like to work to see who is available to advise your thesis. Once you have chosen an advisor, register in Banner for your advisor's section of ENGL 700. Talk with your advisor and develop a reading list for the winter. For certain projects, you and your advisor may consider adding a "research term" (for ENGL 500 credit) to allow you to do more research in advance of your thesis semester.

- Please remember that you need to have at least a 3.5 GPA in the major to be eligible to write a senior thesis. Students below this GPA threshold are encouraged to do an ENGL 500 Independent Study project in lieu of a thesis.

- See the "Thesis Requirements" section of this guide for a complete list of deadlines and expectations.

Quick Guide to Key Deadlines

Fall Thesis Deadlines	**Spring Thesis Deadlines**	**Task**	**Complete?**
April of prior spring	October of prior Fall	Contact potential advisors; choose advisor; be sure to register for advisor's ENGL700/CRWR701 section in Banner during normal registration	
May of prior spring	December of prior Fall	Meet with advisor to discuss suggested reading or research over summer or J-term	
First week of Fall classes	First week of Spring classes	Meet with advisor to discuss semester plan; double-check that you are registered for thesis	
Friday, Sept. 11, 2026	Friday, Feb. 19, 2027	Joint thesis students only: turn in contract to both advisors and ENGL department chair (see guide)	
Friday, Sept. 18, 2026	Monday, Feb. 22, 2027	Two-page Prospectus plus Bibliography due to advisor and ENGL department chair (see guide)	
Friday, Oct.9, 2026	Monday, March 29, 2027	First section (15 pages) due to advisor (or advisors if Joint)	
Friday, Nov. 20, 2026	Friday, April 23, 2027	Full Rough Draft due to advisor (or advisors if Joint)	
Sometime in November	Sometime in April	Contact potential second and third readers; begin discussions of possible oral defense date/time	
Sunday, Dec. 6, 2026	Sunday, May 2, 2027	Email copy of thesis to advisor	
Friday, Dec. 11, 2026	Friday, May 7, 2027	FINAL DRAFT DUE BY 1:00 PM (see guide for specifics)	
Between Dec. 11 and Dec. 18, 2026	Between May 7 and May 17, 2027	Oral Thesis Defense	
Friday, December 11, 2026 (to be confirmed)	Friday, May 7, 2027 (to be confirmed)	Thesis Presentation & Celebration	

The Thesis Process

1. Choosing a Thesis Topic

Choose a topic that interests you and that will continue to interest you over the course of the semester. Be ambitious: don't shy away from major authors or big ideas, or from comparative or interdisciplinary topics. Ideally, you will be able to draw on material that you have encountered in earlier classes, perhaps especially your advanced seminar. The work on your thesis, however, needs to be original and new. It must not duplicate material that you have worked on in prior courses.

Early on, you will wish to narrow your topic sufficiently so that it can be covered well in the limited time and space that you have. Literary theses generally take one of two forms: a close examination of the work of a single author (or a single work); or a study of a theme or idea as it is manifest in works by several authors. So, while you might start with a general idea or interest—say, "Women in Shakespeare"—as you shape your topic you will want to narrow your focus to a more and more specific point: women in Shakespeare's tragedies, women in *Hamlet,* Ophelia, for example. You should expect to do some research to narrow your topic—to find out what has already been written on the topic, and what sources might be available. Because your time is so short, you'll need to narrow and focus your topic quickly. For this reason, we suggest that you begin thinking about your topic well in advance, doing some reading over the summer after your junior year in consultation with your advisor. Both kinds of topics—single author or thematic—need a clear focus and a defensible thesis.

You can think of the published work done on your topic as an ongoing conversation that you would like to join. To do that, you need to know what has already been said and to find a contribution that you can make through your own research and reading. Search the MLA Bibliography (available on the Library website), which is the standard database for literary scholarship. Take advantage of Interlibrary Loan and other borrowing options to get copies of materials that Middlebury doesn't own. Consult with your advisor---or anyone else in the department, too—and make use of the reference librarians, who can direct you to other resources.

2. When to write the thesis

If you intend to graduate in May, you have two options for scheduling a senior thesis: Fall or Spring.

If you intend to graduate next February, you may also write a thesis in your "super senior" Fall.

3. Thesis length

Approximately 30-35 pages. This does not include your bibliography or any materials or illustrations you may wish to include as appendices, but it does include footnotes and endnotes.

4. Citation style

The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (9th edition) is the standard for formatting literary scholarship. Purchase a copy. Zotero or other citation software can be very helpful as you organize your bibliographical citations, but double-check

everything for accuracy. You are responsible for errors and omissions in your notes and bibliography.

Theses should be typed, double-spaced, with footnotes at the bottom of the page or at the end of the paper. You may use double-sided pages if you wish. Please note that brief parenthetical citations included in your text are the MLA standard now. Footnotes are generally explanatory or discursive. Follow MLA style in preparing your "Works Cited" and "Works Consulted" lists. Your final thesis must include an Abstract (see sample in this guide).

5. Thesis Deadline

The thesis deadline is not flexible. There will be a penalty of one third of a grade per day for late submission unless you provide a formal dean's excuse by the deadline. These deadlines have been designed partly to ensure that the faculty has time to schedule an oral defense for all thesis writers.

6. First Steps

Your first priority is to present a two-page, typewritten prospectus with a tentative bibliography; this will be submitted to your advisor and the ENGL department chair. Your prospectus should include a chapter or section breakdown and your best effort at a presentation of your argument. The prospectus should also indicate the scope of your project—i.e., what is the time period that you are considering? Which works are you focusing on? The bibliography should include separate sections for primary and secondary sources, and should indicate which editions you are planning to use.

While compiling your prospectus and bibliography you should be reading the secondary works on your topic to familiarize yourself with what has already been written on the subject. This reading will help you pare down your topic into something that you can do well in the limited time and length you have to work with. This is an important stage in any researcher's work; make good use of it. There are "research guides" available for many fields of literary study, and many are available online.

After solidifying and narrowing your topic, you should prepare a general outline of your possible chapters or sections. In a thesis of 30 or so pages, you may find that two or three chapters or sections will help you to manage your argument most effectively. But you do not <u>need</u> to have chapters unless you find such divisions helpful.

After that, it is time to start writing. Even if you are not finished researching, start writing what you know as soon as you can. The act of writing will bring your topic into sharper focus, and will help you understand what else you need to know in order to finish your thesis. You might end up discarding or completely revising this first draft, but the effort will not have been wasted. Research does not stop when writing begins; the two are closely related and dependent on each other.

Your writing schedule will be developed in consultation with your advisor, but some deadlines (such as for the Prospectus, the first section, the rough draft, and the final copy) are department-wide and firm

Members of the ENGL faculty will be your best guides for the mechanics of essay writing, but you may also want to consult this helpful article on academic writing: http://www.yale.edu/bass/wp/writingprose.pdf. The MLA Handbook is also a helpful guide.

Remember that the research and writing of your ENGL thesis should reflect your own independent work. We expect that your advisor will provide you with constructive and helpful feedback on your drafts. It is not acceptable, however, to have other people (including parents, former teachers, other Middlebury faculty or students) do the important thinking, writing, and revising for you. All of the words in your thesis should be your own, unless they are included in quotation marks and a source is cited. You must provide a source for borrowed ideas as well as borrowed language. You will write and sign the Honor Code statement on your final essay, indicating that it is your own work.

7. Finishing the thesis

Give yourself at least a week to reread your final draft and to make final revisions, to refine your prose, to eliminate typographical and other errors, to check the accuracy and form of your citations, and to tighten your argument so that it is as clear as possible.

The final version of your thesis should have several components that appear in a logical order. Once you have compiled (and checked) your bibliography and have polished the thesis itself, you'll need to create a title page, an abstract, and, if you wish, a table of contents, acknowledgements, etc. In general these elements are included in the following order:

1. title page
2. acknowledgements (optional)
3. table of contents (optional)
4. thesis, with footnotes and/or endnotes
5. "works cited" and "works consulted" lists

Submit your abstract on a separate piece of paper, not bound in the thesis. Be sure to sign the Honor Code on each of the three final copies of your thesis.

8. Submitting the thesis

On the **Thesis Due Date** (see page 4 of this guide for deadlines), you must send a digital copy of your thesis and abstract to your adviser and readers (unless otherwise requested) and hand in one hard copy of your thesis to the ENGL Department Office, 306 Axinn, by 1 p.m. The department will pay for one photocopy if you take your thesis to Reprographics (FIC) to be copied. Reprographics has inexpensive and effective binding options available, but you are not required to bind your thesis.

9. Evaluation of the thesis

ENGL senior theses are read by the project advisor and ideally two other readers, who may be ENGL faculty members or a faculty member from another Middlebury department. You and your advisor should plan to contact these additional readers at least a month before your thesis is due.

After the thesis defense, your advisor and each reader will independently and anonymously assign a numeric grade to the thesis into which will be factored your performance in the thesis defense. The final grade for the thesis will be the average of the grades given by your advisor and readers. This grading scale will be used to convert the numerical average to the final letter grade:

Letter Grade	Numeric Grade
A	93 – 95.99*
A-	90 - 92.99
B+	87 - 89.99
B	83 - 86.99
B-	80 - 82.99
C+	77 - 79.99
C	73 - 76.99
C-	70 - 72.99
D	60 - 69.99
F	0 - 59.99

*95.99 is the highest grade possible, not 100, since we do not give A+'s.

10. Thesis defense

Every thesis student will have an oral defense. You and your readers will discuss your thesis with you for about 50 minutes, commenting on aspects of the work, asking that you elaborate on or reconsider points that you have made in the course of your paper. A strong thesis defense may raise the grade on a thesis, particularly if points are clarified and elaborated on well. The thesis defense is part of your project, and should be taken seriously. Thesis defenses are generally scheduled within two weeks of the thesis due date.

After the thesis defense, your advisor will write you a letter summarizing the readers' comments on your work and will share with you your final grade on the project.

11. Presentation of your thesis

All thesis students are expected to participate in the end-of-semester celebration of the critical and creative thesis writers. Each writer presents a short summary of, or reading from, their work for a gathering of friends and faculty members. This is a joyful community event that celebrates everyone's hard work.

12. Criteria for evaluation of the thesis

The following elements are essential for a successful literary-critical thesis. You

have encountered most of these criteria before in other department coursework, but the senior thesis gives you the longest time and the best opportunity to address them on your own. Faculty readers will evaluate each thesis on an individual basis, but they will consider all of these components—and how well they are executed—in determining the thesis grade. Note that this list of criteria includes performance in the defense.

a. Bibliography: how well has the writer researched the topic? Does the writer make use of all the appropriate primary and secondary sources? Does the writer know where his or her own argument fits into the conversation about the topic?
b. Scope and thoroughness: is the topic appropriately narrow and thoroughly considered?
c. Thesis: is the argument of the thesis clear and well supported by appropriate evidence?
d. Organization: are the structure of the thesis and the argument logical and convincing?
e. Methodology: does the thesis make appropriate use of literary theory and/or of other literary-critical strategies and devices?
f. Writing: is the thesis written clearly and without distracting errors?
g. Validity: does the thesis make a defensible, convincing and illuminating contribution to the study of its topic? Are the interpretations it offers valid?
h. Originality: does the thesis offer something new—new material, an original comparison or angle, an insightful or creative reading of a particular text?
i. Performance in the oral. How well does the writer defend his/her work, explain aspects of it, and elaborate on it?

In addition to the criteria listed above, the ENGL faculty will consider at least two other factors when determining your thesis grade: the inherent difficulty of the topic and the nature and availability of secondary sources on it

Thesis Requirements and Deadlines

I. Form

Thesis: The thesis should be 30-35 pages long, including footnotes, but exclusive of works cited/works consulted lists and appendices. The title page should be prepared according to the example provided in this booklet. The department will pay for one copy if you have it done at Reprographics (FIC). Three copies of your thesis must be submitted to the ENGL Department office, 306 Axinn, by the deadline, along with **an abstract** page (not bound into the essay) that includes the title, year and month of submission, advisor's name, a one-paragraph summary of your argument and a brief bibliography. (See the sample abstract included in this booklet.) Remember to sign the Honor Code on all three final copies.

II. Deadlines

No alterations to this deadline schedule will be made except in extraordinary circumstances. Unless otherwise noted, **all deadlines fall at 1 p.m. on the stated day**. (See chart on p. 4 of this booklet.) You will NOT be able to turn in your thesis to Campus Security or to leave it outside the ENGL department office or in faculty mailboxes after hours. You will have to turn it in the next day, and it will be considered late. Be aware that there is great demand for the use of college printers at these deadlines. Don't wait until the last day to print.

Extensions will not be granted for computer breakdowns. You are responsible for learning all of the correct procedures for backing up your writing and for avoiding computer viruses. Be sure to save your work in at least three distinct places.

Joint Thesis Requirements

The senior work of joint majors must demonstrate in a single project an integration of the two majors that the student has elected. The project will be jointly advised by a faculty member from each of the two relevant departments and these faculty members, and an outside reader, will evaluate the thesis.

Joint majors are required to draw up, in consultation with their advisors, a contract describing the requirements for their senior thesis. Such a contract will specify deadlines, citation form, meeting schedules, and any other requirements for joint senior work that have been agreed upon by advisors and student. (For example, students writing a joint thesis in ENGL and a language department may be required to utilize sources in multiple languages; there may be required workshops in one department; there may be criteria for evaluation in addition to those for the ENGL critical thesis itemized above.) This contract must be submitted to both thesis advisers and to the ENGL department chair. (See Quick Guide for submission dates, p.4.) All subsequent work—prospectus, bibliography, drafts, etc—must be submitted to both advisors unless the contract specifies otherwise.

For students who are joint majors in ENGL and Theatre and who wish to pursue a joint project that involves directing or acting, senior work will normally comprise two full-credit classes, ENGL 0708 and THEA 0708. These classes should wherever possible be taken in the same semester, with the understanding that a central goal of the joint major is the thorough integration of both aspects of the major. A single-credit, single-semester joint project remains an option for those who wish to pursue a joint thesis that does not include a practical component such as acting or directing.

Students wishing to undertake a joint major in ENGL and Film and Media Culture (FMMC) should follow the joint major requirements listed above. Such students may also wish to take FMMC electives such as FMMC 0257-Storytelling in Film and Media and FMMC 0279-Film in Literature. Students wishing to write a joint creative senior thesis must also take 3 CRWR workshops, and those wishing to write a screenplay for their joint thesis must take specifically FMMC/CRWR 106-Writing for the Screen, and FMMC/CRWR 341-Writing for the Screen II—prior to beginning the thesis. Such projects must be on topics approved by advisors in both departments.

Students writing a joint thesis in HIST or HARC should register for HIST 700 and HIST 711 or HARC 710 and HARC 711, and attend the required thesis workshop.

[Sample Title Page]

"We are Not Angels": A Poetics of the Body in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

Patrick Abatiell

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English, Middlebury College

May, 2007

I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this work.
[signature]

[Sample Abstract]

Laura Williams
Advisor: Daniel Brayton

Due Date: December 3, 2010
Second Reader: Antonia Losano

From Entitlement to Stewardship:
Children's and Young Adult Literature of the Chesapeake Bay

My thesis examines the relationship between the environmental crisis in Maryland and Virginia's Chesapeake Bay area and the development of regional children's and young adult environmental literature. Early explorers of the Bay region in the 1600s, such as Captain John Smith, and early Bay citizens in the early 1800s, such as John Davidson Godman, extolled the abundance of the Bay's resources in their diaries. As a result, early literature of the Chesapeake Bay region reflects this belief in "free plunder". In works such as Gilbert Byron's *The Lord's Oysters*, the Bay's resources are claimed as an abundance to be freely taken, a God-given right to be used. However, this incredible bounty could not last given the increased human impact on the Bay ecosystem. With worsening habitat loss, overfishing, and pollution over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Bay sunk into a state of profound degradation. As the Bay's health declined and the environmental movement developed, Bay-area literature, specifically an emergent genre of children's and young adult environmental literature, demonstrated a thematic shift from entitlement towards stewardship of the Bay's resources. By utilizing didactic writing, metaphor, and anthropomorphism, authors encouraged youth by varying degrees to value the Bay's resources, protect the health of the Bay, and persuade others to become stewards of a healthy Chesapeake for future generations. In my thesis, I analyze via close reading the methodologies each author uses to spread their environmental message among young readers. Regardless of the specific approach used to draw readers of all ages to cherish a threatened ecosystem, Chesapeake Bay children's books, young adult novels, and memoirs illuminate the intricacies of a steadily dying ecosystem—a place, this body of literature asserts, that is profoundly worth saving. These works of literature inform and color a growing and popular movement for more deliberate, in-school environmental education in Maryland.

Sources include:

Blackistone, Mick. *The Day They Left The Bay*. Annapolis, MD: Blue Crab Press, 1991. Print.
Byron, Gilbert. *The Lord's Oysters*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1947. Print.
Cohen, Susan. "Water and Words: Giving Voice to the Chesapeake Bay." ASLE Conference. Kalamazoo, MI. 1999. Lecture.
Cummings, Priscilla. Personal interview. 27 August 2010.
- - -. *Chadwick the Crab*. Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1986. Print.
- - -. *Chadwick and the Garplegrungen*. Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1987. Print.
Curtis, Jennifer Keats. *Oshus and Shelly Save the Bay*. Arnold, MD: Bay Media, Inc., 1999. Print.
Hungerford, Harold R., and Trudi L. Volk. "Changing Learner Behavior Through Environmental Education." *Journal of Environmental Education* 21 (1990): 8-17. Print.
Meacham, Margaret. Personal interview. 23 June 2010.
- - -. *The Secret of Heron Creek*. Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991. Print.
Roberts, Callum. *The Unnatural History of the Sea.* Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2009. Print.
Seuss, Dr. *The Lorax*. New York: Random House, 1971. Print.
Sharpe, Susan. *Waterman's Boy*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1990. Print.
Warner, William W. *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs, and the Chesapeake Bay*. 1976. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994. Print.

Funding Sources (SRPS)

Awards: Up to $1200 (Oct. 1, Jan. 24, or April 15 deadlines) and up to $350 throughout the academic year as funding permits.

Overview: SRPS is designed to support senior research projects, and these may be relevant for some creative nonfiction theses. For 2020-21 the upper limit was $1200; however, the average award is about $500. Expenses are reimbursed (see the approved expense types below) and must occur after your application is approved. Prior summer expenses may be reimbursed in October only if an application is submitted for preview prior to beginning the project.

Selection: Funding will be awarded on the basis of the quality of the application and the availability of funds. Preference will be given to students who do not have access to funds in their major departments. You may receive only one award from the SRPS. Students who will have senior status during their project dates may apply. If you have questions about whether you are eligible please contact the Undergraduate Research Office (URO).

Faculty Endorsement: Students must have a statement of support from the faculty advisor for the project and be enrolled in the appropriate independent study and/or thesis course during the relevant semester(s) of work. The online application submission is also sent to your project advisor, who can then reply to uro@middlebury.edu with their endorsement.

Accessing Funding:

Funding notification will be emailed approximately 3 weeks after the application deadline. Otherwise, rolling applications are reviewed weekly.

Reimbursement: Reimbursements for expenses incurred require scanned or e-receipts and a completed URO Funding Receipts and Summary Form. You will only be reimbursed for activities that were approved in your SRPS application. Reimbursements take 2-3 weeks to receive payment.

Direct Charges: Materials can often be ordered directly through your department coordinator. Cash advances for human subjects are also available. All requests require at least 7 business days for processing.

Reimbursements for projects are due before the end of the academic year of the award or before you graduate. Reimbursements take 2-3 weeks so if you are leaving campus or closing your bank account due to graduation, please plan accordingly.

Approved SRPS Expenses:

Supplies- needed to conduct research. Some equipment purchased shall remain the property of Middlebury College for future use by other students.

Travel to conduct interviews, fieldwork, or research- save all travel related receipts and keep track of all mileage.

Compensation of research subjects- compensation as a gift certificate from a College facility such as the Grille or the College Store is preferred. However, arrangements can be made to pay small cash stipends (up to $10 each) with the appropriate documentation.

Photocopying of research materials (not thesis proposals or completed theses) - a receipt must accompany reimbursement requests for photocopy expenses.

Please note that requests to purchase computer programs, technological resources, books or media need to be checked with LIS to see if the college doesn't already own or is willing to purchase for general use. All non-consumable resources will remain property of the college and need to be turned in to URO at the completion of your project.

Because they are limited, these funds are intended to support the conducting of research, rather than the presentation of research results.

Please contact URO if you have reimbursement needs that are not listed above.

More information can be found at https://www.middlebury.edu/office/teaching-learning-research/student-resources/undergraduate-research/funding/senior-research-project-supplement