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Guidelines for the Creative Thesis Project
Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Book Arts Program
School of Library and Information Studies
College of Communication and Information Sciences
The University of Alabama

A. Purpose of the Creative Thesis Project

The purpose of the Creative Thesis Project is to show, by means of a body of work, the range and mastery of selected skills that the student has acquired in the program. The project must demonstrate the highest level of those skills, representing the best work that the student can produce. The professional life of a student often begins with the Creative Thesis Project, which acts as a link between graduate school and the professional world. The design and execution of the project, as well as its timely completion, make this transition a smoother one by giving the student a body of work with which to present themselves after graduation.

B. Prerequisites

The student must be second-year standing, as evidenced by successful completion of all required Book Arts courses. See Degree Requirements at <http://bookarts.ua.edu/curriculum/>

In addition, successful completion of the required Graduate Symposium course (BA 592, 3 credits) must precede enrollment in the required production course, BA599: Creative Thesis Project (taken for 9 to 12 credits.)

C. Credit Hours and BA599

Students are encouraged to produce their projects during the fifth and sixth semester in the Book Arts Program. The 9 to 12 credit hours of BA599 should be spread throughout the final academic year of the students' enrollment.

Students who complete their course requirements but have not defended their Creative Thesis Project may register for an additional 1 hour in BA599 Creative Thesis Project, Thesis and Exhibition, in order to maintain access to the book arts studios for the purpose of completing their project. Continued use of the book arts facilities is at the discretion of the appropriate faculty member(s) and must be prearranged. All work for the MFA Book Arts Program, including the Creative Thesis Project, must be completed within six years from the date of a student's initial enrollment in the first course in the program. Satisfactory completion of the Creative Thesis Project is required before the degree will be awarded.

D. Creative Thesis Project Proposal

Informal planning for the Creative Thesis Project may begin at any time after the first semester, however the Creative Thesis Project proposal is to be developed during the Graduate Symposium course. When fully developed, the proposal should be submitted, in draft form using the appropriate format (at the end of this document,) to the members of

the student's Creative Thesis Project Committee for comments and refinement. The student and the committee will continue to discuss the proposal until a final version is approved.

The committee may reject a proposal that does not present an opportunity for the student to demonstrate her/his highest level of skill, and in this case, the planning process must begin again. For this reason, it is recommended that the student begin the process as early as possible in the semester that the student is taking the Graduate Symposium.

The final proposal is the backbone of the project and may need to be modified as the project progresses. Any substantial modifications to the project and revisions to the proposal must be submitted in a timely manner to the committee for its approval. Minor changes to the proposal may be resolved with the committee chair.

E. Creative Thesis Project Committee

Students select a thesis committee and committee chair during the BA593 Graduate Symposium course. The committee must include the book arts studio faculty and at least one additional person with particular expertise from outside the program. The chair must be a full-time member of the book arts studio faculty. Other committee members may be drawn from the university faculty at large and may include one person who is not a university faculty member but who has expertise in the book arts.

The role of the Creative Thesis Project committees is to guide students through the creative Thesis Project and to provide consultation and advice as they work independently to produce the project. If the chair of a committee is not able to consult with the student due to prolonged absence from campus, a temporary chair for the committee will be assigned. If a committee member is no longer able to function in that role, they may be replaced as necessary. Although not recommended, the student can dissolve the committee and begin the process again. Obviously, this is a step that should be taken only in extreme circumstances, and the initial decisions about the makeup of the committee should therefore not be taken lightly.

F. Descriptions of Creative Thesis Projects

1. The goal of the MFA in Book Arts Program is to introduce the student to the various and interrelated aspects of the book arts including letterpress printing, bookbinding and related structures, hand papermaking, and history of the book. The knowledge and skills a student acquires during the initial semesters in the program should lead her/him toward a Creative Thesis Project that will reflect that body of knowledge and skills, and focus a student's strengths.

2. The individual needs and interests of students are diverse, so Creative Thesis Project requirements are flexible enough to accommodate those interests while providing a general framework within which the student can devise a project and produce it without undue burden. Students may elect to focus their Creative Thesis Project in one or more area, including letterpress printing, bookbinding, papermaking, or history of the book. Students may also elect to combine more than one of these areas in the Creative Thesis Project.

3. The following are some ideas for possible Creative Thesis Projects. These are guidelines and suggestions only and an actual final project will be negotiated to suit the needs of individual students and the requirements of the Book Arts Program and its faculty.

Bookbinding/related Structures

a. *Edition binding*: Students choosing to pursue edition binding might plan to arrange with a printer to supply copies of a text to design and execute an edition binding. It is not necessary that the student print the text to be bound for this type of Creative Thesis Project. In the case of edition binding, a minimum number of bound books in the edition will be determined in the proposal. Model-making for the edition binding process is essential prior to the commencement of the actual project, as is budget preparation and schedule development.

b. *Fine/design binding*: Students choosing to emphasize fine/design binding are required to bind a minimum of five books of the same or different texts, each in a unique style. The bound books are to be housed in protective containers appropriate to the bindings, with external identification of the contents. The materials used for fine/design binding should be appropriate not only to the text(s), but to the value of the book(s) and the time expended upon the creation of the work. Note that it is not the intent of this program to fully train individuals who intend to become Design Binders.

Letterpress Printing

The student may produce a fine press limited edition book. While the exact edition size will be determined in the Creative Thesis Project proposal, the edition size must be at least fifty copies. Post production aspects such as prospectus development and marketing might be elements of the Creative Thesis Project.

Hand Papermaking

The student may produce a substantial edition of sheets of handmade papers, the number of which will vary depending upon the type of fiber(s) to be processed and any decorative/experimental elements to be incorporated into the sheet. Extensive research into various papermaking fibers and fiber preparation techniques should be part of a Creative Thesis Project centering on handmade paper.

History of the Book

Occasionally, the student may wish to research and write an extensive thesis on some aspect of the book arts or the history of the book. Since this type of Creative Thesis Project is not a common one, the details of the scope of the thesis, required length, scheduling, etc. need to be carefully worked out in the proposal.

Some students choosing this option may wish to print their text as a limited edition book or pamphlet. In this case, the length requirements for the written text may be less than required for a text not to be printed as part of the Creative Thesis Project.

G. Requirements for successful completion of the Creative Thesis Project

Requirements for successful completion of the Creative Thesis Project:

- *Committee Defense:* The final meeting between the student and his/her committee is a private defense of the Creative Thesis Project and should take place on or about the day of the public defense. In addition to examples of the thesis project, the student may be asked to submit any documentation made during the completion of the Creative Thesis Project, including log book, images, models, etc., to the committee for review (which will be returned to the student unless submitted as part of the book arts archive) prior to the private defense. The private defense is a time for the thesis committee to examine and evaluate the final product of the student's Creative Thesis Projects. This includes a series of questions to the student about their understanding of the successes and weaknesses of their project and area of research. Although guests cannot contribute to the private defense, they may be present, with prior approval of the thesis committee chair. The student must schedule the defense date at least three weeks before The University of Alabama Graduate School "Deadline to Report the Results of Final Comprehensive Examinations". This date is set by the Graduate School, and changes every year (<http://gradsystem.ua.ua.edu/calendar/listitems.aspx?gid=20&dl=1>).
- *Thesis Paper:* Two weeks before the scheduled defense date, the student must submit a process narrative paper detailing the goals, processes, and conclusions resulting from the Creative Thesis Project to the committee. This paper is a concise self-evaluation of the student's final thesis project, discussing both the successes and challenges of the final results. The student must compare the original thesis proposal with the final project results, and include descriptions of any special research methodology or craft skills developed. Other supporting materials, such as a bibliography and resource list, should accompany the report when appropriate. (MLA is the approved format for the School of Library and Information Science.) The heading of the paper should include: the student's name, the title of the thesis project and the defense date. A copy of the report is required as a supplement to the archival deposit and will be placed in the student's academic file.
- *Documentation:* The student must document the Creative Thesis Project throughout its production stages, demonstrating the creative processes and techniques utilized. Students are strongly encouraged to keep a logbook or journal, as well as models, proofs, mock-ups, photographs and video of the project from its conception to completion. This documentation may be included in the Creative Thesis Project, thesis paper, exhibition, and public presentation.
- *Exhibition:* Each student is required to mount a professional exhibition of the Creative Thesis Project in an appropriate local venue, ideally on campus or a centrally located gallery in Tuscaloosa.. This exhibition should include well-designed explanatory labels and signage outlining the student's thesis work, as well as any other pertinent information. The exhibition must be open to the public for viewing during the week of the student's MFA thesis defense. Joint

exhibitions are an option for student's graduating within the same timeframe. All exhibition logistics must be planned and executed by the student(s).

- *Public Presentation:* During the time period that the Creative Thesis Project exhibition will be on display, the student will give a public defense of the project to the book arts faculty, students, invited guests, and members of the community. Students are expected prepare a 20-30 minute presentation with an additional 10 minutes reserved for a question and answer period. The presentation must be a professional and polished overview of the student's thesis research, including both the content and the execution of the project. This public defense may be accompanied by slides or a video, and should be of the highest professional level. The presentation should assume that the audience has only a very basic understanding of the processes and theories involved.

The student is responsible for scheduling and preparing the presentation room for any needed audio visual equipment, and for testing and setting up this equipment prior to the presentation.

- *Archive copy:* Upon the successful completion of the thesis, the student must provide the Book Arts Program with an archival copy of the creative work. Creative Thesis Projects are generally produced in a sizable edition and the archive copy is one book from the larger edition. In circumstances where an edition is not produced, what constitutes a program archival copy will be negotiated between the student and the Creative Thesis Project committee, based on the project, and will be documented in the Creative Thesis Project proposal.

H. *Process:*

It is the student's responsibility to keep their thesis committee up to date with their process as they develop their thesis. A student's success during the final defense can be jeopardized if they have not made a documented effort to inform individual committee members of their process and progress.

I. *Evaluation of the Creative Thesis Projects*

Creative Thesis Projects are evaluated by committee members using the following criteria:

- Creative work
 - Mastery of fundamental technical skills common across the book arts
 - Mastery of specialized technical skills appropriate to professional specialization
 - Demonstrated problem solving abilities and creative, critical thought processes
 - Demonstrated fulfillment of project in alignment with the project proposal
- Thesis Paper
 - Well articulated conceptual framework for the Creative Thesis Project
 - Clear explanation of how the project fulfills or diverges from the vision articulated in the project proposal
 - Clearly articulated plan for dissemination of work
 - Critical assessment of the work and the creative process

- Clear description of the development of skills or acquisition of new skills related to the production of the creative object.
- Public Presentation
 - Well articulated conceptual framework for the Creative Thesis Project
 - Clear explanation of how the project fulfills or diverges from the vision articulated in the Creative Thesis Project proposal
 - Clearly articulated plan for dissemination of work
 - Critical assessment of the work and the creative process
- Public Exhibition
 - Professionalism of exhibition
 - Clarity of supporting materials that provide explanation of the project and the exhibited materials
 - Appropriate aesthetic choices of exhibition materials in relation to gallery space
 - Critical assessment of the work and the creative process
 - Understanding of the unique challenges of exhibiting book arts materials

Creative Thesis Projects must demonstrate the student's mastery of the book arts and be relevant to the student's future goals. It is expected that this body of work will assist students as they transition out of graduate school in pursuit of work in their chosen areas. The creative work and supporting documentation should demonstrate relevance, validity, and original creative thought.

After all requirements have been met and the standards and expectations of the committee have been satisfied; the student will receive written notification of the successful completion of the Creative Thesis Project.

An unsatisfactory evaluation and critique by the committee may be given if the student grossly deviates from the proposal without prior approval from the committee or fails to maintain the standards set out in these guidelines. In such a case, the student will be asked to redo the initial project or submit another project proposal.

J. Materials

Materials and supplies for the Creative Work is the responsibility of the student. The use of costly materials is neither necessary nor required. The project is not intended to create a financial burden for the student. Students must create a realistic budget for their project as a part of their proposal.

A Checklist of Key Elements for a Successful Creative Thesis Project

By third semester in the MFA Book Arts program:

- Check that you are on target to complete all required course work for your degree before your defense date. See here: <http://bookarts.ua.edu/curriculum/>

During the BA 592 Graduate Symposium course:

- Draft the Creative Thesis Project Proposal
- Form a committee, with a member of the Book Arts faculty as committee chair.
- Submit a draft proposal to your committee utilizing the official format.
- Incorporate feedback from your committee into a final proposal.
- Receive approval from the committee of the final proposal.

After BA 592 Graduate Symposium course:

- Check that you have completed the required number of credit hours for graduating See here: <http://bookarts.ua.edu/curriculum/>
- Produce the Creative Work, with appropriate documentation and requirements. Prior to production, show drafts, mock-ups, etc., to both members of the Book Arts faculty, regardless of who your chair is.
- Keep your committee up to date on the progress of your thesis through monthly emails and/or meetings. Make a paper trail of changes and progress to avoid communication misunderstandings later on!
- Update your Creative Thesis Project proposal schedule and description as changes arise, and notify your committee of these changes. You must notify and get approval from both members of the Book Arts faculty regarding any major changes.
- Schedule the location and time of your exhibition as soon as possible.
- Schedule the Creative Thesis Project defense date the semester before you intend to defend, with your committee chair. Check the graduate website for deadlines, set by the graduate school. Once a defense date is established, reserve a room for the Public Presentation with the Library school office.

Two weeks prior to your defense date

- Provide your committee with a copy of your Thesis Paper and an example of your Creative Work

- Check with your committee chair to ensure you have met all requirements for your Creative Thesis Project
- Check that the room for your Public Presentation is reserved, and has the necessary functional AV equipment.
- Install your Creative Thesis Project Exhibition.

Defense date

- Hold your Public Presentation
- Participate in a private defense with the Creative Thesis Project Committee private defense. At this time, submit the required archival copy.

Use the following format to prepare draft and final versions of the Creative Thesis Project Proposal. Be as detailed as possible.

Creative Thesis Project Proposal
MFA in the Book Arts Program
School of Library and Information Studies
The University of Alabama

Name:

Date:

Creative Thesis Project Committee (names of chair and other members):

Title of Creative Thesis Project:

Proposed area(s) of project focus: *(printing, binding, papermaking, etc. and/or area of research)*

Description of the project:

- content: *What is project about? How will you generate content and imagery? List any research sources.*

- structure: *binding structure, edition size, deluxe editions, etc.*

- processes:

- *kind of paper: handmade (out of what), machine made (what kind)*

- *image-making process (lino, photopolymer, etc.)*

- *text (metal or photopolymer)*

- *anything else?*

Proposed budget:

a. Labor *(provide an overall monthly schedule, including tasks & estimated hours)*

b. Materials *(paper, type, leather, board, adhesives, etc., with possible suppliers and costs)*

c. Other *(travel, etc.)*

Studio space requirements *(indicate where you plan to produce this work and whether you intend to utilize the Book Arts studios)*

Anticipated date of completion:

Anticipated semester of graduation: