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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 in second-year standing as evidenced by successful completion of the core of required studies in book arts. 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 BA 599 Creative Thesis Project course (taken for 9 to 12 credits).

C. Credit Hours and BA 599 Creative Thesis Project

Students are encouraged to produce their projects during their final year in the MFA Book Arts Program. The 9–12 credit hours of BA 599 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 credit hour in BA 599 Creative Thesis Project 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 their highest level of skill, and in this case, the planning process must be restarted. 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 course.

The final proposal is the backbone of the Creative Thesis Project and may need to be modified as the project progresses. Any substantial modifications to the project and/or 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 BA 592 Graduate Symposium course. The committee must include the book arts studio faculty and at least one additional person with particular expertise from outside of 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 has expertise in the book arts.

The role of the Creative Thesis Project committee 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 form a new committee. 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

During their time in the MFA Book Arts Program, students are introduced to the various and interrelated aspects of the book arts including hand papermaking, letterpress printing, bookbinding and related structures, and the history of the book. The knowledge and skills a student acquires during the initial semesters in the program should lead them toward a Creative Thesis Project that will reflect that body of knowledge and skills and focus on their strengths.

Creative Thesis Project requirements are flexible enough to accommodate the diverse interests and needs of individual students while providing a general framework within which students can devise and produce projects without undue burden. Students may elect to focus their Creative Thesis Project in one or more areas including letterpress printing, bookbinding, papermaking, or the history of the book.

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

Bookbinding and 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 for. 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 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 between two to five books of the same or different texts, each in a unique style. The materials used for fine/design bindings 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. The bound books are to be housed in protective enclosures appropriate for the bindings with external identification of the contents. 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 limited-edition fine press project, artist book, or collection of broadsides. The scope of the project and edition size must be determined in the Creative Thesis Project proposal and approved by the student's committee.

Hand Papermaking

The student may produce an edition of sheets or artworks of handmade paper, the number of which will vary depending upon the type of fiber(s) to be processed, any creative processes or experimental elements to be incorporated in the sheets, and any printing that will be done on the sheets. Extensive research into various papermaking fibers and 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 pamphlet or book. In this case, the length requirements for the written text may be less than what is required for a text that will not be printed and bound as part of the Creative Thesis Project.

Requirements for successful completion of the Creative Thesis Project

- *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 proofs, mock-ups, photographs, and videos of the project from its conception to completion. This documentation may be included in the public presentation and thesis paper.
- *Public Presentation:* During the time period that the Creative Thesis Project exhibition will be on display, the student will give a public presentation of the project to the book arts faculty, students, invited guests, and members of the community. Students are expected to 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 research, content development, and execution of the project. This public presentation may be accompanied by slides and videos. In developing the presentation, the student should assume that the audience has only a very basic understanding of the theories and processes involved. The student is responsible for scheduling and preparing the presentation room in addition to testing and setting up any AV equipment that is needed for the presentation.
- *Thesis Paper:* Two weeks prior to 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 their committee. This paper should be a concise self-evaluation of the student's thesis project that discusses both the successes and challenges encountered throughout the production of the project. In addition, the student must compare the original thesis proposal with the final project 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 paper when appropriate. (MLA is the approved format for the School of Library and Information Studies.) 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 paper is required as a supplement to the archival deposit and will be placed in the student's academic file.
- *Exhibition:* Each student is required to mount a professional exhibition of the Creative Thesis Project in an appropriate local venue on campus or a gallery in Tuscaloosa. This exhibition should include signage, ideally vinyl wall decals, of the student's name and Creative Thesis Project title as well as wall labels and any other pertinent information. The exhibition must be open to the public for viewing during the week of the student's 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).
- *Private Defense:* The final meeting between the student and their committee is a private defense of the Creative Thesis Project and should take place on or around the day of the public presentation. In addition to examples of the thesis project, the student may be asked to submit any documentation, including logbooks, proofs,

mock-ups, photographs, 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 Project. This includes a series of questions to the student about 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. (<https://graduate.ua.edu/current-students/student-deadlines/>).

- *Archive copy*: Upon successful completion of the requirements of the Creative Thesis Project, 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 only one copy from the edition is needed for the archive. In circumstances where an edition is not produced, what constitutes an archival copy will be negotiated between the student and the Creative Thesis Project committee, based on the project, and this will be documented in the Creative Thesis Project proposal. Additionally, Creative Thesis Project proposals developed during the Graduate Symposium course and thesis papers will be archived and shared with future students. If a student wishes that these documents (Creative Thesis Project proposal and thesis paper) remain private, this must be arranged with the student's thesis committee.

H. *Process*:

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

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 Thesis Project 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.

K. Colophon

Colophons must state the following: "This project was produced at The University of Alabama Book Arts Program, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Book Arts." For projects that do not require a colophon, the above statement must be submitted in some form with the project and/or its documentation to the archive.

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 track 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 on 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. Prior to production, show drafts, mock-ups, etc., to all members of the Book Arts studio faculty, regardless of who your chair is
- Keep your committee up to date on the progress of your thesis through emails and/or meetings
- Make a paper trail of changes and progress to avoid communication misunderstandings later on
- Update your Creative Thesis Project proposal as changes arise and notify your committee of these changes
- Schedule the location and dates of your exhibition as soon as possible
- Schedule your private defense date the semester before you intend to defend with your committee chair (check the Graduate School website for deadlines)
- 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 copy of your thesis Creative Thesis Project
- 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 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 and submit the required archival copy of your Creative Thesis Project

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

Creative Thesis Project Proposal
MFA 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 (papermaking, printing, binding and/or proposed areas of research):

Description of the project:

- Content (What is the project about? How will you generate content, including text and imagery? List any research sources.):

- Structure or format (indicate edition size here, if applicable):

- Processes:

- Kinds of paper (handmade, machine made) or substrates
- Image-making processes (pulp painting, screenprinting, linoleum, photopolymer, etc.)
- Type (metal or photopolymer)
- Anything else?

Proposed budget:

- Labor (provide an overall monthly schedule, including tasks and estimated hours)

- Materials (paper, plates/blocks, binder's board, bookcloth, adhesives, etc. with suppliers and estimated costs)

a. Other (travel, etc.)

Studio space requirements (indicate where you plan to produce this work)

Anticipated date of completion:

Anticipated semester of graduation: