THESIS AND ADVISING

Do people take classes for credit during their third years?

Some take classes in their third year, but it’s not necessary unless you have requirements left to fulfill. However, you must enroll for thesis credit during the semester in which you plan to graduate, and if you’re working as a TA or RA you need to be enrolled for two hours.

NOTE: One to four credits cost the same for residents and non-residents alike. When a person takes five or more credits the fee skyrockets quite a bit for non-residents. In the third year, this formula becomes most important—particularly for those students who choose to leave Iowa for their third year. For current tuition fees, see https://www.mauui.uiowa.edu/maui/pub/tuition/rates.page.

Can I do thesis credits during my first and second years?

Definitely not during your first year and generally not during your second. A thesis is considered the capstone of your career as a grad student, and for this reason it’s sort of putting the cart before the horse to take thesis credits before you’ve finished a substantial portion of your coursework.

It should be understood that the Nonfiction Writing Program is an educational program and not a writers’ colony or a writing studio. And while our goal is to be immensely supportive of your writing projects, we also believe that there is a lot that we all can and ought to learn about the genre to which we have committed ourselves. That is why we put a strong emphasis on the course work in the program. For that reason, we limit the number of thesis hours you can take. If you need more time for your project, you’ll need to do it outside of your plan of study.
**How does registration work during the third year?**

Same as for first and second, but you sign up for thesis hours on ISIS if you're ready. You take thesis hours WITH someone (your thesis adviser), so you need that professor’s section number (see drop down list located on ISIS).

**Do I need to spend my third year on campus?**

Not necessarily, as long as you're in touch with your thesis adviser and have filled all of your other course requirements.

**What is full-time status?**

A minimum of 9 semester hours is considered full-time enrollment.

**How do I create a thesis committee? Who serves on it?**

In your second year, start asking people to be on your committee. You should form your committee by the end of the Spring Semester of your second year. The committee consists of three members. Generally, your thesis chair should be one of the primary faculty members of the Nonfiction Writing Program. These presently consist of John D’Agata, Patricia Foster, Jeff Porter, and Bonnie Sunstein. But other faculty members within the English Department have close ties to the Nonfiction Writing Program and can also serve on your committee.

Two members of your committee must have primary appointments (tenure-track) in the English Department (though not necessarily in the Nonfiction Writing Program). If you are unsure whether someone’s primary appointment is in English (many faculty teach in more than one department), check with Cherie.

A third member of your committee MUST be either the program’s annual spring Visiting Professor or a University of Iowa professor from outside of the Nonfiction Writing Program. If you’d like to have someone serve on your committee from outside the University of Iowa, you need to be approved beforehand by the Director of the program and also by the Dean. If you would like to propose someone as the third member for your committee who is not a member of the University of Iowa’s faculty or a Visiting Professor, contact that person and ask them for a copy of their CV. Then draft a letter to John D’Agata explaining how that person’s expertise will serve your thesis. E-mail both the CV and your letter to Cherie before the prospectus meeting for your thesis.
After you’ve found a thesis director, you should try to choose the rest of your committee as soon as possible. Also, you should have an initial prospectus meeting with your committee before the end of your second year.

**What’s a Prospectus?**

When you identify a possible thesis topic and/or thesis director, you must draft a "prospectus"—typically 5-7 pages, explaining the topic, scope, mode, audience, etc., and maybe giving a tentative breakdown of chapters or section, as well as a bibliography. Your thesis director will help you refine this document as a way of initiating the thesis-advising relationship. Please contact Cherie, if you are interested in reviewing previous submissions.

**Prospectus Eligibility**

Before you can submit your prospectus, you must complete the “Prospectus Eligibility Form,” which Cherie will distribute to all second-year students. You should complete and return it early in the spring semester of your second year. This form simply asks you to note all the courses you have taken and the requirements you have met, as well as those you plan to take/meet before graduating. It’s a way for the Program Director to ensure that you are on track before you begin working on your thesis in the near future. Once your Prospectus Eligibility Form is reviewed and approved, you are eligible to submit a prospectus.

**Prospectus Meeting**

Usually within a few months, after the secondary thesis committee members have been identified, the student will give the prospectus to each committee member and all four people will meet to discuss it. The job of your committee is to trouble-shoot your prospectus, identifying potential strengths and weaknesses of the project. Your committee will also make suggestions for useful reading. Afterwards, the student revises the prospectus to everyone’s satisfaction, and the thesis director signs the document and files it with Cherie. The Director of the Program will also need to sign the document.

Prospectus meetings should be held late in your second year.

**What is the role of advisers in the Nonfiction Writing Program. Must we have one? Are they assigned?**

For your first year, the Program Director serves as your adviser. The Program Director can sign forms, give advice, support, etc. After the first year, anyone within the Program can
serve as your adviser, but once you’ve identified a thesis adviser, he/she fills the role of all-around adviser. Please inform Cherie once this has been confirmed.

**What is the role of my thesis adviser?**

Your thesis adviser guides you, but this depends on your relationship with your adviser. Cases will differ, but you should expect mentoring and guidance to the extent you feel necessary. Meet early with your adviser and try to hammer out clear expectations between the two of you. Keep in mind however that the thesis is not an Independent Study. You are expected to demonstrate in your thesis that you can work on your own to complete an extended and accomplished piece of writing. You should not expect to be hand-held during your thesis, because that defeats the purpose of the thesis.

**Does my thesis have to be nonfiction?**

This is actually a tougher question than it seems. Several years ago, the Nonfiction Writing Program agreed with the Graduate College that a thesis written by a student in the Nonfiction Writing Program should be “nonfiction.” That said, the boundaries between fiction, poetry, and nonfiction are of course blurry, and exceptions can be made in certain circumstances. But, this IS a nonfiction program and that fact should be honored in spirit if not always to the letter. If you have any doubts, please discuss this with your adviser and/or the Program Director. If necessary, you can petition the Nonfiction Writing Program Advisory Committee to work on something slightly different from the norm.

**How long does my thesis need to be?**

Your thesis should (except in special circumstances, such as different media) be a minimum of 75 pages, double-spaced. See Graduate College Guidelines for specific details on format. Website link: [http://www.grad.uiowa.edu/theses-and-dissertations](http://www.grad.uiowa.edu/theses-and-dissertations)

*I’m worried about the amount of white space in my thesis. Will the Grad College make a fuss if there’s a lot of white space?*

Don’t worry too much about this. Caren Cox (former Director of Academic Affairs) in the Grad College wrote in an e-mail:

“**In the process of reviewing theses and dissertations from 100+ programs, the reviewers and I try to allow for a certain amount of flexibility when it comes to a format evaluation of creative, as opposed to academic, deposits. I have shared your comments with my team, reminding them that, especially in the case of nonfiction, fiction and poetry theses, we have a slightly different standard than that imposed for**
someone, say, in chemistry. We will allow for the use of some unconventional spacing techniques by these folks, however we also will look for consistency in the use of spacing devices, particularly within each story or poem. One thing that will not be permitted is the insertion of a page devoid of text within the thesis. (This is probably the only hard and fast rule when we talk about spacing.)

I don't believe that it is necessary to provide each student with a memo of dispensation. Hopefully the students will be able to format within the required parameters, knowing that there truly is the ability to push the envelope a bit.”

When and how do I turn in my thesis?

A preliminary draft of the thesis (First Deposit) must be submitted to the Graduate College by a deadline in the term of your graduation (usually three weeks before the due-date for reporting the results of the defense). This early draft is reviewed solely—but strictly—for compliance with the formatting requirements of the Graduate College. Students are informed of any mechanical problems they need to correct. The final draft, which has to meet all requirements for formatting and paper quality, and has to be signed by the thesis committee members after the defense, must then be submitted to the Graduate College by the deadline for the "Final Deposit" (usually a week after the due date for defense results).

Deadlines change from semester to semester. It’s EXTREMELY important for you to be on top of this and know what the deadlines are. Cherie will inform you of all these deadlines early in your graduating semester, and you can always ask her if you are in doubt. You can also check the Graduate College website.

What happens at the thesis defense?

The format of the defense can vary somewhat depending upon the thesis committee, but fundamentally it is an editorial session in which you, the writer, discuss your work with three attentive readers. It starts by asking you to leave the room while the committee discusses the merits and problems of your thesis. This discussion can go on for twenty minutes or more. After you’re invited back in, committee members ask you questions about your thesis and offer you the chance to answer these questions to the committee’s satisfaction. If the committee believes your thesis still has substantial weaknesses, they might decide not to pass it, or they might decide to pass it with revisions. In any case, it should be understood that your defense is truly a defense and not simply an automatic pass. Most often, defenses turn into lively discussions, a final rigorous workshop of sorts, a last test before we’re confident in your ability to represent our program well in the larger world.