MFA Film Thesis Requirements

Your Major Professor will schedule an oral defense within two weeks following the written exam. The oral defense represents the most important review of your performance in the program prior to beginning work on your thesis. At the oral defense you may be asked questions from the written exam or any other relevant area, including any creative or academic work that you have completed since your First Year Review. Because the oral defense provides you with an opportunity to correct or amplify answers you gave in the written exam you are strongly urged to carefully prepare for the oral defense. Immediately following the oral defense, your committee will meet briefly to discuss your performance.

The Committee will determine whether you have passed, failed, or passed with qualification. If “passed with qualification” you may be required to take an additional course, supplement your performance on the exam with additional work such as writing a paper on a specific topic, or read additional texts. Your Major Professor will oversee the satisfactory completion of this work. If you fail the exam outright you are allowed a second opportunity to take a new Advancement to Candidacy Examination, which will normally be scheduled near the start of the next semester. Failing the ACE a second time or failing to perform any additional work that may have been assigned at the oral defense will result in removal from the program.

Normally, after successfully passing the oral defense your Major Professor will ask you to share any ideas you may have at that time for your thesis production with the other members of your committee. For this reason, you should have discussed any preliminary ideas you have for your thesis with your Major Professor prior to the oral defense.

Year Three

Thesis

Once you have successfully completed the Advancement to Candidacy Examination you become a candidate for the thesis. The thesis, both the written and production portions, represents the culmination of your graduate studies. Since your guide and advocate through this process is your Major Professor it is essential that s/he be involved in the development of the thesis at every stage. Initially, you will need to create a thesis prospectus. See Appendix C of this Handbook for guidelines on the prospectus. The entire Graduate Faculty must approve the prospectus before actual work on the thesis can begin. Your Major Professor will present your prospectus to the Graduate Faculty for approval.

Studio I, II, and III (6910, 6911, 6912) are the courses provided for the actualization of the thesis. Studio I is normally taken for research, writing the script and pre-production planning; Studio II for the actual production; and Studio III for postproduction and writing the thesis document.

In the timeline established with your Major Professor, you will present preliminary versions (rough cuts) of your thesis production as well as sections of the written document to be evaluated, rewritten, expanded, or embellished as recommended. In essence, your Major Professor becomes the editor of your written document and a collaborator on your production. As part of this timeline, a date will be set for the final Thesis Defense. Format for the written document must strictly adhere to the guidelines developed by the Graduate Advisors in the Graduate School.
**Thesis Authorship**

In keeping with the program’s central mission, which is to train the complete independent filmmaker, your thesis film should be a work of your own creation. The idea of creative ownership in the highly collaborative art of filmmaking must take into consideration that a film is, in effect, “written” three times: when the script is written, when the film is directed, and when the film is edited. In order to demonstrate creative ownership of the thesis film, you must accomplish at least two of the three above, and one of those must be directing. In other words, you must write and direct, or direct and edit, or write, direct and edit your thesis film in order for it to qualify as a work of “your own creation.”

Successful films start with good stories, and the program has high standards for screenplays that are to be the basis for thesis work. Students are encouraged to collaborate with other writers or develop scripts from other sources. A pool of short stories and scripts that meet the department’s standards for dramatic writing is available to students as source material if they prefer. Students who collaborate with other writers or develop their scripts from other primary sources will be expected to both direct and edit their thesis films. On the other hand, students who direct their thesis films from scripts of their own creation may employ other students as editors if they choose. However, the bottom line is you are ultimately responsible for all three aspects of the “writing” process and the final work will be judged accordingly.

**Thesis Defense**

The last phase of the MFA is the Thesis Defense. This defense is the final step in the completion of the degree requirements for the MFA. When the production and written document are completed to the satisfaction of the Major Professor, copies should be provided to the other committee members. [Please note the thesis delivery time table below.] Committee members may recommend changes or alterations to either the production or the written document.

At the Thesis Defense, much like the oral defense of the Advancement to Candidacy Exam, the committee may ask about the production, written document or anything else they find relevant to your course of study. Following the Thesis Defense, you generally have about a week to make any final adjustments in the production and/or the written document recommended by the Major Professor or the other committee members. If it is deemed that you cannot make the required adjustments in the time allotted, you will not move forward to graduation.

**Thesis Delivery Time Table [minimum]:**

- Delivery of completed written thesis and fine-cut film to your Major Professor—two weeks prior to the thesis defense.
- Delivery of corrected written thesis and finished film to the other committee members—one week prior to the thesis defense.