

**Western University  
Department of Visual Arts**

**MA/MFA WRITTEN THESIS GUIDELINES**

**Length of the Written Thesis:**

The MA thesis is a document of approximately 80 -100 pages; an MFA written thesis is 40 – 60 pages in length and accompanies the thesis exhibition. (Approximately 275-300 words per page)  
Bibliographic format for the Department of Visual Arts is Chicago Manual of Style, Humanities format.

**What a Master’s Thesis Is, and What it Should Do:**

A thesis is a substantial research paper that attempts to address a problem or answer a question. Questions should be formulated in consultation with a faculty supervisor to ensure they are not too broad and are answerable. The thesis should develop an argument supported by evidence based on primary and secondary research, and it should make a significant contribution to scholarship. It involves collecting, organizing, and analyzing information and ideas, then synthesizing research on a topic in order to present new ideas. This means it should situate your new research in relation to pertinent literature from art history, cultural theory, contemporary art, and any other relevant disciplines. It requires that you draw conclusions, formulate hypotheses, and develop and support an argument. Writing a Master’s thesis is a complex process that teaches you how to ask research questions, how to find and work with sources, how to participate in an academic conversation, and how to communicate ideas in a clear and concise form.

**Five Basic Steps to Writing a Thesis:**

1. Select a research topic
2. Identify a research problem or question
3. Find, evaluate, and interpret relevant sources
4. Outline and organize an argument
5. Draft and revise the thesis

**Choosing Strategies for Identifying an Interesting Research Question or Problem:**

1. What do you want to find out about your topic?
2. Have you found anything surprising or particularly interesting from your research so far?
3. What have other scholars discussed in their research on the same topic?
4. Are there any problems or debates that relate to your topic? How do your ideas relate to the controversy?
5. How have other authors interpreted the primary sources you are studying? Are there any other possible interpretations?
6. Have you found new primary sources that might change the way your topic is understood?
7. How would you summarize your ideas about your topic in one or two sentences?
8. Can you explain the general problem or area of research that your paper will contribute to?
9. How do your research and your argument contribute to the field of study? Why is it significant?
10. What question do you want to answer in your thesis?

**Specific to the MFA Written Thesis:**

11. What terrain of art discourse/practice raises significant questions pertaining to your own art practice and/or areas of intellectual inquiry?
12. What questions have artists before you found to be of interest, that perhaps, need revisiting or reinterpreting?
13. What critical questions complement the material investigations you undertake as an artist?
14. What kinds of theories and practices might inform a critique of your practice?

**Using Sources Effectively:**

- Sources should be used to support your own ideas.
- You will use sources for information and sources for arguments and ideas.
- Think about what your sources mean in relation to your thesis. Does an authority provide evidence that can be used to support your idea? Do the sources offer opposing points of view

**Using Sources Effectively cont'd:**

- that you will evaluate? If a source contradicts your argument, how will you handle it in your thesis?
- Cite sources using the Chicago Manual of Style, Humanities format

**Organization:**

- **Introduction**

The introduction allows your readers to understand what you are going to talk about and why. Your introduction must lay the groundwork for your argument and provide enough information to convince readers that what you propose to do is reasonable. It also serves as a map to assist readers in navigating your thesis. In general, an introduction should be structured like an inverted triangle. The beginning introduces the reader to the topic of the essay and begins to narrow the topic. The middle establishes the question you will ask about the topic, while the end of the introduction, the most narrowly focused part, states your thesis, which is the claim or argument you wish to make about your topic. Thus an introduction moves from the general to the specific.

- **Body**

The body of your thesis should be organized into chapters, and each chapter should address a particular aspect of your research problem or question. The way your thesis takes shape will depend on the nature of your research question. In some instances, it would be suitable to organize the chapters around case studies that allow you to investigate different aspects of your research question. In other situations, different chapters might focus on different artists or different bodies of work by the same artist. The number and length of chapters will also vary. The organization of chapters should be determined in consultation with your thesis supervisor.

- **Further on the Body of the MFA Thesis**

In many cases an artist will include a brief discussion of his/her own work, within the context of other aspects of the paper. It is recommended that this be included in a later chapter of the paper, or within the paper's conclusion. It is suggested that this discussion focus on calling attention to the artist's creative strategies and to the art production itself, without placing a strong emphasis on interpretations of the work. As well, direct comparisons between the artist's works and works from art history or to contemporary works should be avoided in favour of a discussion of artistic intention informed by the issues the paper has raised.

- **Conclusion**

While the introduction introduces your reader to the research question, the conclusion should answer it. A conclusion is more than a summary of your thesis; a conclusion should tell readers how your thesis contributes to the general topic you have explored. The conclusion is a good place to reflect on the research project as a whole and to answer the question "who cares?"

**The Studio Exhibition in Context of the Written Thesis:**

The studio exhibition is considered a key element of the entire MFA thesis production, and in a majority of cases will be considered to bear greater weight regarding the overall value of the thesis. In some cases the studio exhibition and written thesis will carry equal weight. While the written thesis is largely an analytical work that may include some reference to the artist's own practice, the studio exhibition is a body of original work that results from the artist's creative investigations. The studio work should not be thought to have an illustrative relationship to the written thesis (or vice-versa) but the two should have a complementary relationship. Typically, the written thesis will be concerned with the historical/theoretical/discursive terrain in relation to which the artist's work may be considered. The studio project will operate out of the terrain under study with the intention of moving the artwork being developed in an innovative direction.

**Due Dates:**