

MFA Thesis Guidelines

School of Design
Graduate Communications Design

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If the four semesters in the MFA ComD program is a personal and professional journey for students, thesis is their destination. The thesis is a premise or viewpoint that is proven and demonstrated through the body of work they create. It is a manifestation of multiple independent and studio-based design explorations, and should originate from that which inspires, excites, concerns and intrigues students about design. They will be evaluated less on their specific line of inquiry and more on processes, methodologies, integrity and courage of their work.

The MFA **Thesis is not a single project, but rather a body of work consisting of multiple sub-problems based on a single topic or subject area.** These projects and visual explorations share a common methodology and culminate in a significantly focused capstone project. The body of work is in direct support of the area of inquiry and culminating project.

The thesis should represent a coherent voice and make a **meaningful contribution to the field of design.** Students are expected to demonstrate professional competence and persistent ideas applied within a body of work concluding in a public defense and presentation, written documentation and group exhibition of their thesis.

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What constitute a Thesis?

A thesis is a proposition, conjecture or argument that presents a unique and fresh viewpoint on a subject. It is **research-based exploration** that requires an expansive contextual framework (the subject), within which experimental communication design responses that make an **original contribution to the discipline** are created (the content). As such, a thesis is not a solution to a specific problem, but rather the expression of research and design methodologies that suggest strategies with which to think about, understand and illuminate the subject.

The content itself, being specific design responses, is not the subject, and therefore not a thesis. For example, "Visual Interfaces in Autonomous Vehicles" suggests a solution to a particular problem, whereas the subject "Autonomy, Automation and Authority" suggests a contextual framework able to encompass wider cognitive, social and technological issues. While a specific design proposal of an in-vehicle display may very well constitute one part of the thesis content, the subject of the thesis allows research and design making across numerous scenarios and viewpoints. Similarly, a design response that seeks to monitor and mitigate "Urban Water Pollution" is but one example within the subject of "Consumption, Waste and Public Awareness." Moreover, the subjects of autonomy, automation, authority, consumption, waste and public awareness all point directly to design methodologies that can be experimentally applied to numerous concrete explorations.

Furthermore, a thesis should reflect an understanding of the distinction between research methodologies and design strategies. Research methodologies, such as literature reviews, ethnographic probes and grounded theory, are a means to assemble information, data and observations. While such research tasks themselves may find direct expression through design, it is the analyses and interpretations of the information demonstrated through design that constitute design strategies. In this way, **a thesis makes an argument, through design, on the research that has been performed.**

YEAR ONE

Spring Semester Courses

In the spring semester of year one students take the following courses: DES-791 Thesis Research, DES-751 Cross-Disciplinary Studio, and either DES 741-Design Writing. Students also typically enroll in one or two electives.*

* A note about electives - Students are required to take 15 credits of graduate-level electives as part of their 62 credit requirement, and of these a minimum of 6 credits should be taken in a disparate program. Electives can come from courses across the Institute. Students may also take independent studies, summer courses, and summer abroad as electives. Speak with advisors about how to effectively manage electives while enrolled in the program.

Thesis research

In the spring semester of year one students enroll in Thesis Research, where they will explore various research methods with the goal of identifying what will become the basis of a thesis topic. Students are expected to define an appropriately focused research question, formulate a viable abstract and thesis proposal, complete a literature review on the topic, and a plan of action for the written and visual components of the proposed thesis topic. The intent is to clarify the nature of the methodology that will be applied to the explorations that comprise the thesis.

Research question: The thesis should pose a question relevant to contemporary discourse and issues. The research question evolves during the semester toward increased focus, relevance, arguability, and within the given time frame and student resources, its measurability.

Abstract: a short 250 word maximum summary that identifies the specific area of interest. The abstract should introduce the topic and the research question in context, justify its relevance, and make an hypothesis about methodologies the student plans to apply when investigating the question and related projects.

Literature review: a 2000 word maximum survey and discussion of the literature organized chronologically or thematically. Students are expected to present and to analyze, in a critical manner, the relevant published literature in order to justify their research question and demonstrate a detailed knowledge of their area of interest. The literature review should follow an appropriate bibliographic style. The department and/or thesis advisor will suggest the style manual that is most appropriate to the student.

Thesis proposal: The thesis proposal - not to exceed 500 words - should capture the question or premise that students propose as the subject of the thesis. It is a concise summary: the guiding question

or premise, the processes students intend to use, the anticipated outcomes, and the audience. Students should include a justification that defines a rationale for the work and addresses why the study is important to the field of design with references to previous works and other related research. Students should define and visualize the positioning of their thesis in relation to other disciplines and clearly specify the thesis' contribution to the design discipline.

Plan of Action: an iterative plan of action that will propose specific sub-problems, readings, events or other activities that will guide the methodology students intend to apply to their embodied explorations and critical investigations.

Candidacy reviews

Candidacy Reviews are held at the end of the Spring semester in year one. The review includes a public 30 min. presentation (15 min. + 15 min. Q&A) open to faculty and students observers; Three days, 2 or 3 parallel sessions; assigned committees in which Thesis research faculty do not attend their own student reviews.

The final critique of students' **thesis proposal, abstract, research question, literature review, and plan of action, as well as relevant studio and seminar work from both Fall and Spring of the first year** will take place. Students are expected to design a pamphlet with the support of Thesis research faculty to be distributed in advance to the committee.

Students are expected to present process and research methodology: definition, ideation, synthesis, realization (production) and implementation (placing the work in context) phases of the work.

CANDIDACY REVIEWS
2 days, 3 parallel committees
30 min. per student (15 pre+15 Q&A)
Thesis research advisors
do not review their own students

CROSS DISCIPLINARY

DESIGN WRITING

THESIS RESEARCH

TEACHING PRACTICUM OR ELECTIVE

ELECTIVE