

**University of Iowa**  
**MFA in Literary Translation**  
**MFA Thesis: Significant Dates, Deadlines and Guidelines**

The MFA Thesis is a translation into English of a collection of poems or short stories, a short novel, or a play, with a critical introduction that sets the work in context. The introduction, in addition to discussing problems of translation, analyzes the structure and style of the source text, and presents rationale for the translation strategies and techniques adopted. If your translation is a section of a longer work, you should also include a one page synopsis of the complete work. An oral defense of the thesis examines in detail both the candidate's translation and the introductory essay. As MFA Candidates, you should please observe the following dateline in order to insure consistent progress and successful completion of your MFA thesis.

Bullets indicated by → involve institutional deadlines and processes required by Graduate College

→ Graduate College Written Thesis Requirements may be found at:

<https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/academics/thesis-and-dissertation>

→ Submission guidelines for MFAs may be found at:

<https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/academics/thesis-and-dissertation/submitting-fees-copies>

### **DATELINE—Internal and Graduate College Deadlines**

#### **First Year, Fall Semester (or at 0-12 s.h.):**

- Attend program orientation
- Set up a meeting with Program Director to begin drafting a plan of study, together with your educational objectives and professional aspirations.

#### **First Year, Spring Semester (or at 12-24 s.h):**

- Set up an Advisory Committee of two members at first, adding at least a third member by the time you submit your thesis proposal.
  - At least one committee member represents literary translation
  - At least one committee member represents the candidate's foreign language & literature area.
- Survey the literary scene in the country or language of your translation focus, with an eye to select work(s) for your thesis project. Consult with faculty members in your language, lit and culture area toward the same end.

## Second Year, Fall Semester ( or at 24-36 s.h.)

### **Early September:**

- Visit the University Library and review previous MFA theses in literary translation.

### **Late September (first two weeks)**

- Determine your thesis project, in consultation with the Program Director and your academic advisor.
- Email faculty members you would like to invite to serve in your MFA thesis committee, sharing with them your thesis proposal. The Committee composition should include:
  - 3 members minimum
  - 2 tenure-track, Iowa faculty members
  - 2 Iowa faculty in the student's field of study (Literary Translation and DWLLC)

### **Early October (first two weeks)**

- Submit a one-two page proposal about your thesis project, addressing its significance particularly as a translation project. The proposal has to be approved by your academic advisor and the MFALT Program Director.

### **November:**

- ➔ Consult Graduate College Website for significant due dates (marked below with \*\*)  
URL: <http://www.grad.uiowa.edu/deadlines?portal=current-students>
- Consider determining the four dates in the box below in consultation with the committee members. This is not mandated but highly recommended.

- \_\_\_\_\_ First full draft of translation to committee members
- \_\_\_\_\_ First full draft of the introduction to committee members
- \_\_\_\_\_ Committee members return to you revision suggestions re: both the translation and the critical introduction
- \_\_\_\_\_ Defense Date

### **By the end of December, mid January**

- Strive to complete a working draft of your translation manuscript, ready for revisions in early Spring Semester

## Second Year, Spring Semester (or at 36-48 s.h)

**Late January:**

- ➔ Review Graduation Checklist on Graduate College Website\*\*
- Download from Grad College Website all pertinent forms that have to be signed by various faculty members before or at the defense date.

**February:**

**SET UP DEFENSE DATE, TIME AND ROOM: Consult with Jenna Miller and your thesis committee members and set up a date sometime BETWEEN APRIL 1 AND APRIL 20.**

- ➔ Graduation Degree Application\*\* February 26, 2021
  - ➔ Jenna Miller and Aron Aji will complete your Master's Plan of Study Form
- URL: [https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/sites/gc/files/Non-Doc-POS\\_NEW%202%208%2016.pdf](https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/sites/gc/files/Non-Doc-POS_NEW%202%208%2016.pdf)

**EARLY MARCH:**

Submit your thesis and introductory paratext to your Thesis Committee members, **to give them enough time to review, comment and prepare for your oral defense in early April**

**Early March:**

- ➔ Submit Master's Plan of Study Grad College\*\*

**Early April**

- **Thesis Defense before April 20**
- ➔ Defense Report due to Grad College\*\*

**APRIL 27:**

- ➔ Thesis Deposit to Grad College\*\*

## GUIDELINES

### 1) **How Strict are the Guidelines and Deadlines?**

The Graduate College deadlines and guidelines are extremely strict and observed without much exception. You should bookmark the relevant Graduate College webpages and insert reminders about deadlines on your calendar! As for internal deadlines and guidelines, they are becoming just as strict with the growing size of our program. Each year, we have anywhere between 8-10 MFA theses completed in the same semester. Besides the logistics of monitoring their progress and compliance with Graduate College requirements, almost all of them include Aron Aji and/or Jan Steyn as the director or reader in the Thesis Committee. Quite simply, we are not able to help you unless you help us help you by keeping up with a steady and seamless regimen of writing toward completion. Also bear in mind that, some faculty members are being asked to be in more than one thesis committee; our lapses can in fact adversely affect their ability to read and comment on your work.

### 2) **How soon should I set up my Oral Defense date?**

Consult significant dates section above re: the time when you should contact Jenna Miller, DWLLC Graduate Programs Coordinator, who will kindly facilitate setting up your defense date. She will need from you the complete list of your Thesis Committee members. Please do not give her tentative names. Make sure all your Thesis Committee members have agreed to serve as readers before notifying Alison Casella. She will then work with you and your committee members to identify a 90-minute meeting before the Graduate College Final Exam Report Deadline. We will make every effort to set a date within the week-to-ten-days prior to the Final Exam Report Deadline.

### 3) **How should I work with my Thesis Committee members?**

It is crucial to discuss this question with each committee member separately. Some will want to see installments of your thesis, while others will prefer reading the whole thesis in one sitting. The program has no firm requirements in place for them. Plus, some readers are crucially important to the progress of the thesis and it would be beneficial if the student consulted with those readers more than at the time of the final reading. Here, too, bear in mind the faculty members' own workload. Advance notice and advance submissions are not only expressions of courtesy but also matter of practical necessity.

### 4) **What about my Thesis Director?**

You should expect and seek to consult more regularly with your Thesis Director. This may take the form of an initial consultation on a 10-15-page portion of your translation, and then a regimen of meetings, the frequency of which the student and the Thesis Director determine.

## 5) How long should my thesis be?

Quantity is certainly less relevant than quality. Your thesis should:

- a) Possess scope and significance, which in turn should determine length
  - b) Demonstrate your dexterity as a translator—how far you have come in your development
  - c) Show you tackling a complex text, making sound and considered decisions
  - d) Display advanced sensibilities concerning the literary/aesthetic dimension of the text being translated
- e) Present a deliberate and coherent manuscript—whether in terms of text, themes, literary styles or concerns, narrative arc, etc.
- f) Since the Thesis is the culmination of your studies in the Iowa Translation Workshop, you may also use it as an opportunity to finish translating an entire literary work as the step toward the next stage in your career, something you can begin shopping around. Indeed, we have had theses in the past that featured 200-300-page manuscripts.

However, concerning the principal goals of the Thesis, you are not required to do the same. As hesitant as we are pinpointing length guidelines, consider that if you are translating:

- a) prose (fiction or nonfiction) or drama, your manuscript can be 60-80 pages of translation;
- b) poetry, your manuscript can be 30-40 pages of translation.

Whether within these ranges or longer, your translation manuscript has to be of consummate quality, presenting you at your best.

## 6) What about Introduction?

From our website: **The MFA Thesis** is a translation into English of a collection of poems, literary essays, or short stories, a short novel, or a play, with an introduction that sets the work in context. The introduction can take the form of **either** a Preface that can exercise some creative license **or** a more extensive and formal Critical Introduction, and both options should address the structure and style of the source text, and present rationale for the translation strategies and techniques adopted. On average, the introductory-paratext is 20 pages in length. The Preface should read like a preface or afterword in a published volume of translation. The Critical Introduction should follow standard requisites of scholarly writing and is strongly recommended for students interested in pursuing doctoral studies in comparative literature, language and literary studies, or creative writing. SEE #8 BELOW RE: GUIDELINES FOR THE INTRODUCTORY PARATEXT.

## 7) Electronic Submission and Embargo?

A translation thesis (however complete and original/creative it may be) is not considered final until it is published by a publishing house or press. In other words, a translation thesis that is 'published' electronically would be vulnerable to plagiarism.

Accordingly, you can request the Graduate College to set an Embargo and not release the electronic manuscript publicly for up to two years. This would give you time to complete your work and shop your translation around to secure a publisher. Please note that the Embargo expires at the end of the second year, and you have to request to extend it, if you still need more time.

### 8) MFA THESIS INTRODUCTORY PARA-TEXT

The introduction can take the form of **either** a Preface that can exercise some creative license **or** a more extensive and formal Critical Introduction; and both options should address the structure and style of the source text, and present rationale for the translation strategies and techniques adopted.

Regardless of the form, an introductory paratext should present  
a coherent narrative arc established through an overarching  
perspective/argument  
and address the following

*concerning the work you translated:*

- the author, her works, her literary genealogy (i.e. her place in her contemporary literary context, her relationship to the literary traditions, her influences, etc.)
- the work and its critical/aesthetic reception in its original cultural/literary/historical context
- what makes this particular work significant—aesthetically, culturally, politically, etc.; what is compelling about it.
- the work in the context of the receiving culture; what does it contribute to the literary/cultural/intercultural conversation in the receiving culture?

*concerning your translation:*

- an overview of your translation experience of this particular work
- what are the primary challenges/opportunities that make this work compelling to translate?
- three or four of the key or most significant translation methods/strategies you have devised/employed concerning primary and prevailing characteristics of the text—i.e. the language, the style, the form, cadence, p.o.v, voice, etc. Refrain from presenting a loose range of characteristics for the sake of being exhaustive. Focus on patterns, prevailing challenges. Always give examples of challenges and of your solutions, sufficiently explaining the why and the how.

The goal is to produce a coherent text that isn't two separate essays vaguely or loosely tied together. Toward that end, write an introduction with an overarching 'thesis' that is about both the literary work and the translation. Often what lend a literary work critical/artistic significance are also the characteristics that compel its translation. The challenges and opportunities it presents the translator are also among the characteristics that make it worth reading and translating. So: think bi-focally from the start.

Use critical or translation theories or secondary sources when necessary, relevant and illuminative. Secondary sources (critical essays, reviews, interviews, etc.) in the original language are always useful and should be consulted/included.

Please refrain from expository accounts about the process (how you stumbled upon the text, your correspondence with the author, your workshop experience, what you didn't notice at first but then you did, etc.) Your paratext should read like any preface, afterword, or critical introduction we would find in a published translation.

-----

## 9) ORAL DEFENSE

- a) It is highly likely that the Oral Defense will be held virtually this year as well.
- b) Make sure to have a hard copy of your thesis with you at the defense.
- c) A Final Exam Report is signed by all members of your committee. This is likely to be done electronically this year as well.  
As for content of the defense:
- d) First of all, please know that typically no one is advanced to the defense stage unless they are ready to pass and complete their studies. There may well be some revision suggestions, of course, but if you are sitting for the defense, we have every reason to believe – and so should you – that you will complete your defense successfully.
- e) The format of the defense includes a bit of ritual. Once we are all in the virtual room, the committee members will ask you to leave briefly. This is when we determine the order of questions and who would like to ask about what. You are then asked to come in for the 'defense' proper.
- f) The defense usually takes about 50 minutes. The flow of questions and answers tends to be fairly organic. The exchange remains cordial, and, ideally, stimulating. This is your chance to speak about your project with a group of engaged, motivated and invested individuals. There may be – and every so often are – pointy questions but you should read them not as signs of disapproval but as evidence of interest.
- g) Be prepared to receive verbal or written comments or suggestions for revisions. From time to time, a committee member may offer to meet with you one-on-one to go over their suggestions. Others may give you written comments on the manuscript or separately. More often, however, the comments are delivered orally. Please take notes and ask for clarifications freely.
- h) Typically, the defense will include questions about both your introductory paratext and your translation manuscript. However, at times, the oral defense may focus more on your introductory paratext. One reason for this is that the committee members who are not translators themselves feel much more comfortable with – and often are palpably stimulated by – your intellectual framework. Another reason is that the tradition of oral defenses is grounded in the scholarly model of

argumentation and critical response, and the introduction naturally lends itself more to such appraisal.

- i) Be prepared to receive comments about your translation manuscript from faculty in the language of the original – who may not have been regularly involved in your project from its inception onward and therefore take the occasion of the defense as the opportunity to help. These comments are always useful and welcome.
- j) As you well know, all translation manuscripts can be improved pretty much endlessly. Your MFA Thesis, too, can, and often will, take additional work, all the way into the publisher's desk! If you would like close analysis of your translation manuscript, past the thesis process, please feel free to ask. We are always happy to help.
- k) At the end of your defense proper, you will be asked to leave the virtual room again so the committee can deliberate about your performance. Then the thesis director will call you in, inform you of the committee's decision.
- l) FOLLOW GRADUATE COLLEGE GUIDELINESS AND DEADLINES FOR THE FINAL SUBMISSION OF YOUR THESIS.