

University of Iowa MFA in Literary Translation MFA Thesis: Guidelines, Timelines, Deadlines, and some Nonlinear Comments

The MFA Thesis is a translation into English of a collection of poems or short stories, a short novel, or a play, with a paratext (normally a critical introduction, or an extended preface, afterword, or translator's note). The paratext puts the work in context, discusses problems of translation, analyzes the structure and style of the source text, and presents rationale for the translation strategies and techniques adopted. Additionally, 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 manuscript and the paratext.

TIMELINE—Internal and Graduate College Deadlines

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

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

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

- Identify a Thesis Director. The Thesis Director should be a member of the Literary Translation program (as of 2024: Adrienne Rose, Aron Aji, Diana Thow, Jan Steyn), or a tenure-track faculty member in DWLLC.
- 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, literature, and culture area toward the same end.

First Year, Summer

- Identify the source text(s) of your thesis project and translate a significant sample.

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

ENROLL in 1 s.h. of TRNS:6400 "Thesis" (Independent Study)

- In this course you will concentrate on the paratext of your thesis. The paratext can be a critical introduction or an extended translator's note. The course will begin by considering different models of writing about translation and culminate in a workable draft of your paratext.

Early September:

- Visit the University Library and review previous MFA theses in literary translation. You should do this online (theses and dissertations can be searched for through ProQuest available through the library website), but also in person (some, especially older, theses are only available as physical copies).

Early October (first two weeks)

- In consultation with your Thesis Director, write 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 Thesis Director and the MFALT Program Director.
- 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 in DWLLC. (As of 2023, for the purposes of MFALT thesis committees Jan Steyn and Aron Aji count as tenure-track members, but the rest of our Translation Programs faculty do not)
 - At least one faculty member in the Literary Translation Program.

November:

→ Consult Graduate College Website for significant due dates.

URL: <http://www.grad.uiowa.edu/deadlines?portal=current-students>

- Discuss the following four dates with each of your committee members, starting with the chair of your committee. (Different faculty members may be able to read things at different times; please always be polite, considerate, and accommodating.)
 - 1) When the first full draft of translation goes to committee members
 - 2) When the full draft of the paratext goes to committee members
 - 3) When committee members will be able to send you revision suggestions (about both the translation and the paratext)
 - 4) The thesis defense date

End of December, mid-January

- Strive to complete a working draft of your translation manuscript, ready for revisions in early Spring Semester. Some of our most successful graduates have arrived with complete drafts of the translation and paratext after the winter break.
- Revise the working draft of your paratext.

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

Enroll in TRNS: 6444 “Thesis Workshop”

Late January and February

- Review Graduation Checklist on Graduate College Website
- Follow all steps outlined in the “DWLLC MFA EXAMS & GRADUATION INFORMATION” PowerPoint circulated by Constance Judd, paying special attention to:
 - Filling out and filing the **Non-Doctoral Plan of Study Form**
 - Officially **scheduling your exam**
 - **Submitting your thesis**

Early March

Submit your thesis and introductory paratext to your Thesis Committee members, **to give them enough time (at least two weeks) to review, comment and prepare for your oral defense in early April.**

- Submit Plan of Study to the Graduate College

Early April

- **Thesis Defense** [SEE TIME RANGE FOR THIS PARTICULAR YEAR: all defenses must be done more than 7 days before the Graduate College [Thesis Deposit date](#)]
 - Your committee will send the Defense Report to Grad College before the due date and after the defense. They may ask you to perform revisions before they send the report.
- Thesis Deposit to Grad College [[SEE SPECIFIC DATE FOR THIS YEAR](#)]

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 8-15 MFA theses completed in the Spring 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 in the “DWLLC MFA EXAMS & GRADUATION INFORMATION” PowerPoint about the time when you should contact Constance Judd, our 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 her. You should work with 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 between 21 and 7 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 Paratext?

The paratext can take the form of **either** a piece of writing (preface, extended afterword, or translator's note) that can exercise some creative license **or** a more extensive and formal Critical Introduction. 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 first option is 15-20 pages long; the second option is closer to 20-25 pages long. The (option 1) extended preface, afterword, or translator's note should read like its equivalents in a published volume of translation, except that you have more space here to reflect on the work and your translation practice. The (option 2) 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 PARATEXT.

7) Electronic Submission and Embargo?

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 PARATEXT

Regardless of whether you choose to write (option 1) a preface, extended afterword, or translator's note, or (option 2) a critical introduction, your paratext should present a coherent narrative arc established through an overarching perspective/argument and should address the following

concerning the work that you translated:

- the author, their works, their literary genealogy (i.e. their place in their contemporary literary context, their relationship to the literary traditions, their 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 the characteristics that lend a literary work critical/artistic significance are also those that compel its translation. The challenges and opportunities that it presents to 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 when necessary, relevant, and illuminative. The same goes for critical writing about your writer and their work. Secondary sources (critical essays, reviews, interviews, etc.) in the original language are always useful and should be consulted/included/referenced if possible.

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.).

9) CONTENT OF THE ORAL DEFENSE

a) 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.

b) 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.

c) The defense proper 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.

d) 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.

e) 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.

f) 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.

g) 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.

h) 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 and inform you of the committee's decision.

i) FOLLOW GRADUATE COLLEGE GUIDELINESS AND DEADLINES FOR THE FINAL SUBMISSION OF YOUR THESIS.