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
➔ Hard copy 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.):
  o Attend program orientation
  o 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.):
  o 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.
  o 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:
  o Visit the University Library and review previous MFA theses in literary translation.
Late September (first two weeks)
  o Determine your thesis project, in consultation with the Program Director and your academic advisor.
  o 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)
  o 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
  o In consultation with the committee members, determine the four dates in the box below
  o Determine Defense Date, in consultation with your committee members; work with Matt Lively, to set up room, times, etc.

  o _____________First full draft of translation to committee members
  o _____________First full draft of the introduction to committee members
  o _____________Committee members return to you revision suggestions re: both the translation and the critical introduction
  o _____________Defense Date

By the end of December, early January
  o 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**
  o 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 Alison Casella and your thesis committee members to set up a defense date.
➤ Graduation Degree Application**
➤ Meet with Program Director to complete the Master’s Plan of Study Form

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 17
  ➤ Defense Report due to Grad College**

APRIL 28:
  ➤ 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 me and/or Jan 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?**

January or February is the time when you should contact Alison Casella, 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 work load. 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 themes, literary styles or concerns, narrative arc, or in terms of translatorial focus/foci.

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 (10-15 pages) that can exercise some creative license or a more extensive and formal Critical Introduction (25 pages), and both options should addresses the structure and style of the source text, and present rationale for the translation strategies and techniques adopted. 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?
The Graduate College expects that most theses and dissertations will be submitted electronically since an electronic publication certifies the originality of your research, creative work, etc.. But 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. You also have the option to submit a hard copy of your MFA thesis, which defers electronic publication.

Hard copy submission guidelines for MFAs may be found at: https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/first-deposit

8) MFA THESIS INTRODUCTORY PARATEXT
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
addresses 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) Make sure to bring a hard-copy of your thesis to the defense.
b) In advance of the defense, obtain from Alison Casella and bring to the defense all the pertinent pages/forms that should be signed by the committee members, including the Final Exam Report form.
c) First of all, you need to 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, rest assured, we have every reason to believe—and so should you—that you will complete your defense successfully.
d) The format of the defense includes a bit of ritual. Once we are all in the 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.

e) 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.
f) 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.

g) Quite commonly, the oral defenses focus—perhaps disproportionately on your introductory essay. One reason for this 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. Another reason is that the committee members who are not translators themselves feel much more comfortable with—and often are palpably stimulated by—your intellectual framework.

h) At the same time, do be prepared to receive comments about your translation manuscript especially 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.

i) 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.

j) At the end of your defense proper, you will be asked to leave the 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. Almost always, a celebratory handshake or hugs follow.

k) FOLLOW GRADUATE COLLEGE GUIDELINES AND DEADLINES FOR THE FINAL SUBMISSION OF YOUR THESIS.