

Senior Thesis: Frequently Asked Questions

“What bibliographical format am I required to use?”

There is no universal requirement for the bibliographical format of a thesis. Rather, individual thesis readers among the various disciplines individually require their students to use whatever formatting strategy seems appropriate.

Generally, faculty in the humanities will prefer MLA, psychology wants APA, and the social sciences want Chicago or Turabian. However, this is not universally true. Individual professors can be idiosyncratic in their preferences, so *the best advice for thesis writers is that they should ask their readers*. In the rare case that a student comes in looking for a suggested format, and saying that his/her reader has deliberately abdicated this responsibility, we generally recommend MLA, just because it's easier than most of the competing formats.

“What are the formatting requirements for a senior thesis?”

You can find formatting requirements and suggestions on the Registrar's website: http://cmc.edu/writing/formatting_your_thesis.pdf. CWPD consultants are familiar with the site and will point you in that direction if your questions relate solely to formatting issues.

“I'm doing a creative thesis. What are my writing requirements?”

A student working on a creative piece will sort out specific writing requirements with his/her reader. These requirements may or may not include a written component along with the creative piece. Because the elements of a creative thesis are purely driven by the demands of the reader, CWPD consultants cannot offer standardized advice for their formatting and content. Rather, students should ask their readers for these requirements, then relay them to the CWPD staff. It's then the CWPD's job to help you meet those requirements as best we can. CWPD consultants are trained to respond to a creative piece as a general reader would; this means that consultants will share their reactions to the piece with the writer to determine whether the writer's strategies sufficiently meet the goals of the piece.

“How am I supposed to organize this massive, beastly paper?”

The senior thesis is almost always the largest, most complex writing assignment a college senior has ever faced: this can be daunting in prospect. The best advice we can give a student who faces this task is to consider the thesis not as a monolith, but as a series of chapters, each the length of a term paper. While this doesn't make the task any less arduous, it does make it more manageable; breaking the project into smaller pieces is somewhat less staggering to the intellect.

This approach also offers a second virtue: it forces students to think carefully about the organizational structure of the thesis argument before composition gets underway. This is an effect perhaps more critical than the mental ease which a chapter-based strategy provides: any thesis author who isn't thinking carefully about structure at the outset of the work is likely to encounter serious difficulties of composition later on.

Finally, a chapter-based strategy is also helpful to consultants, since it suggests manageable “chunks” which may fit into a single tutorial session.

“How long can I stay at the CWPD?”

Thesis students are encouraged to schedule appointments with consultants throughout the writing process – this includes the research and brainstorming stages – on a regular basis. When you first make an appointment at the CWPD, it’s often a good idea to lay out several hour-long appointments in advance, putting a schedule in place well in advance of your deadline.

Consultants will also encourage you to set these appointments up in advance. In fact, you could even work with the same consultant throughout the semester or year. Doing so gives our staff a chance to keep a thesis student in the hands of a single consultant – this is much more efficient, since it saves hours of re-reading – and it keeps the writer focused on clear and manageable writing tasks.

If you are thinking about requesting an even longer session, carefully evaluate the situation. Do you really have the time (and remaining patience) to go past a 45-minute session? Are you likely to be able to retain anything you discuss after the first session? Bear in mind that it’s often better to return to your dorm, finish some revisions, think about additional questions, concerns, or ideas that these revisions may have inspired, then start up again at a later date on the next part of your thesis. Obviously this strategy is less and less possible as a deadline approaches. If you decide that a longer session would be helpful, contact the Associate Director of the CWPD to request back-to-back sessions.

You may, as always, avail yourself of our comfortable study lounge should you so choose. One virtue of spending time in the CWPD is that it can offer you a space (relatively) free of distraction. You may also find that, during “down” time, consultants may be able to give you insights regarding your work in progress.

Keep your eyes open for specialized Thesis-writing workshops and writing sessions that will be scheduled on a regular basis during the school year.

“Who’s a good reader?”

We really can’t answer this question. You must determine which reader would complement your style and your chosen topic. Think carefully about which reader would best help you meet the challenges of this assignment. CWPD consultants are happy to share their knowledge of the research interests and academic specializations of faculty members, to comment on pet peeves of different readers, and to discuss the different management styles various readers prefer when working with students. It’s important to note, however, that this sort of assistance will avoid value judgments – there’s a degree of professionalism to be maintained, here.