

THE PLAN B THESIS

The Plan B thesis option in the English Department is sometimes referred to as the “short” thesis option, though it is better understood as an alternative to the traditional, chaptered thesis. The Plan B thesis project is extremely flexible, and its form depends on the expectations and desires of the student and their supervisory committee. The project may indeed be a shorter version of the Plan A thesis (pursuing a scholarly problem/research question or a creative work accompanied by a critical essay), though it may also be a shorter piece of scholarly writing accompanied by something else: a podcast, film, or exhibit; an oral history collection; a pair of article-length essays that address a shared topic from different perspectives or with different methods. You can get creative with the possibilities of a Plan B thesis, but remember that you will need to arrive at and agree upon a form with your chair and supervisory committee.

The departmental minimum length for the written portions of a Plan B thesis is 25 pages, though your supervisory committee may set a higher minimum for you given the nature of your project. Students will take only 3 thesis credits to write a Plan B thesis (as opposed to 6 credits for a Plan A). You can find the graduate school’s description of what the completion of a degree with a Plan B thesis looks like here: <https://gradschool.usu.edu/academics/plan-b>

THE PLAN B THESIS PROPOSAL

The proposal has two purposes: to help you define and clarify your project for yourself and to communicate it clearly and convincingly to your Supervisory Committee. As they read your proposal, they need to understand what you plan to do, why it’s worth doing, how you are going to be able to do it, and how they might help you.

Arriving at a thesis topic

For most students, arriving at a thesis topic occurs during extended conversations (both in and out of class) with faculty and other graduate students. You will need to find your thesis topic interesting enough to engage you for several months (if not longer). You will also need to do much pre-writing and reading of primary and secondary sources to write a polished proposal, so make sure you give yourself enough time to work on these preliminary stages.

In general, a thesis should identify and address a research problem. Scholarly research projects are driven by problems, which means that they are motivated by a scholar noticing something in his or her field that demands attention. For example:

- Your research problem might take the form of a perceived knowledge gap: you discover a subject where little work has been done, not much is known, or many questions remain.
- The problem might be that you believe a much-discussed topic demands a critical reexamination in light of new theory or an overlooked perspective.
- The problem could also take the form of a dilemma, puzzle, obstacle, or contradiction that the field needs to confront and resolve or overcome in order to move ahead.
- The problem that interests you may be what guides you to a non-standard thesis format: an exhibit or oral history collection on an underrepresented group or set of traditions, an

- accessible podcast that brings a new perspective to an established arena, two articles that tackle a single subject from two different theoretical perspectives.
- Creative projects, too, may be seen as being driven by a problem—an idea that has not yet been explored in a particular genre, for instance.

Writing the proposal

Proposals are typically around 10 pages plus a bibliography, all double spaced. Some are shorter and some are longer. An extensive, well-developed proposal is a good investment of time and effort, since it can form the foundation for the early pages of the thesis or project itself.

Below are some suggestions for elements to include in your proposal. You can certainly use the suggested categories of “Project Description,” “Literature Review,” “Methodology,” “Outline of Chapters,” “Timeline,” and “Bibliography,” though please note that depending on the form of your Plan B thesis, your committee may ask you to include very different sections. Talk with your thesis chair before moving forward with this format for the proposal.

1. Project Description

In the opening paragraphs of your thesis proposal, describe and explain your topic, the problem you are addressing, its significance (why is this problem important to your field?), and the scope of your thesis project (in other words, what materials will it include, and why?) In this section, and elsewhere in the proposal, you may need to define key terms for your readers, especially if you are using them in specific or unusual ways. In this opening section it may also be appropriate to explain how and why you chose this subject matter—what personal connection it has to you.

Your committee may require you to have a driving thesis statement (the answer to your research question) in the proposal, or they may recommend that you write the proposal centering on the research *question* (in other words, that you write the proposal without committing to a specific thesis statement until you’ve had more time to research). Discuss this with your committee.

Remember, your research question(s) may change as you dive deeper into your project. This is a natural progression, and it may ultimately change the direction of your thesis. Be certain to keep in close contact with your supervisory committee as these changes develop

2. Literature Review

The thesis proposal should contain a section where you review relevant literature, summarizing and discussing the work of other scholars or writers. Doing so accomplishes several purposes:

- It allows you to show how near or far the field has already come to answering your research questions (which may have been the subject of years of discussion by others).
- It helps provide a context in which to locate your project, showing the existence of a scholarly or creative conversation in which you are about to participate.
- It establishes your authority to enter the conversation, showing that you are up to speed with the ongoing discussion and would be a credible participant.

You will need to think about how you will organize the literature review. Can you divide the literature into groups, each representing a similar perspective on the topic? What would be the best sequence in which to present the works of other scholars? What organizing principle might you follow?

You don't want to distort or misrepresent the work of others unfairly to make your own look better, but your thesis proposal is an argument for a particular perspective on the subject matter, and the literature review should play an important part of the support for that argument. A good review of literature will not only represent other writers' work in ways they would find reasonable and acceptable but will also interpret and evaluate that work according to your own point of view. As much as you are able to at this point, identify which writers will be your most important sources, explain why, and explain how you plan to use their work to inform yours. At the end of your literature review, it might be useful to revisit your research questions, reminding your readers how your project will extend the discussion you have just reviewed.

Shaping your literature review into a well-structured argument with the characteristics outlined above will help you avoid the tendency of literature reviews to be tedious, plodding summaries, devoid of any opinion or point—the kind of prose that a reader feels tempted to skip. A well-written review of literature should be compelling reading. If you find yourself struggling to frame others' work with your own writing, consider reading *They Say, I Say*, by Graff and Birkenstein.

3. Methodology

This section of your proposal explains how you will go about your work. If you are doing primary research, what methods of gathering data will you use, and why? If you are doing secondary research, what else will you read besides what you have discussed in your literature review, and how do you plan to analyze your material? If you are doing creative work, it may involve considerable research and analysis too, before the main work of writing begins.

This section might be the best place for you to explain what theory will guide your work and why. It is also the place to mention your experience as a researcher and writer. How has your prior work prepared you to do this project? If your project will involve learning new methods, how will you acquire that expertise? What sources of help are available to you?

At this point in the proposal you should also explain whether or not your research will require Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance. The IRB ensures that primary research does not endanger or compromise the privacy of human subjects. For more information on the IRB, talk with your thesis chair and check out <https://research.usu.edu/irb/>

4. Outline of Thesis

What form will your thesis take when it is finished? For instance, will it follow a traditional thesis structure with chapters? Will it involve forms of creative writing? Multiple genres? Extensive appendices? Digital media, video, or audio?

Provide a tentative outline of your thesis, with chapter or section headings and a few lines of explanation under each. Your readers will want to know why you have divided it this way and why you have chosen this sequence for the sections. Help them see and understand the logic of your

organization. You should also provide a preliminary breakdown of page lengths for each section or chapter, so that it is clear how your proposed work will reach the required length for a Plan A thesis.

5. Timetable

Problems occur in thesis defenses most often when thesis chairs or committee members have not had time to read the thesis, to make suggestions, and to see those suggestions incorporated in a revised version that they have time to read before the defense. Your proposal should include a schedule that you plan to follow for completing the research and writing the thesis. Bearing in mind the Graduate School's deadlines and your own plans for graduation, identify a tentative defense date and work backwards from that. Make sure your timetable meets the committee's expectations:

- Discuss with your supervisory committee how you will share your work along the way. Will you submit drafts to the chair only, or to all members? How will the committee share their revision suggestions with you?
- How long do committee members want to read and respond to drafts?
- In general, the Grad School insists on the following minimum deadlines (note that individual committees may require more time):
 - Submit first complete draft to thesis chair *at least* 4 weeks before defense.
 - All committee members should have reviewed a complete before you schedule the defense date with the Grad School.
 - Schedule defense date with Grad School *at least* 2 weeks before defense.
 - Resubmit revised draft to committee *at least* 10 days before defense.

6. Bibliography

The bibliography at the end of your proposal should be, at a minimum, a list of the works you have cited in your proposal. Your committee may ask you to annotate the bibliography. Your committee may also ask for a separate list of works you have consulted (but not cited in the proposal), and works you are planning to consult. Follow the citation style favored in your field—e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago, etc. You can also download the publication guide from the Graduate School website here: <https://gradschool.usu.edu/files/Publication-Guide-2023.pdf>

THE PLAN B CREATIVE THESIS PROPOSAL

A creative thesis may be in any genre or combination of genres. The thesis proposal, if done well, will aid you in writing the critical introduction to your work, a key component to the creative thesis. Keep in mind that the goal of the thesis proposal is to demonstrate to your committee that you have the necessary background to complete your thesis, that you have organized your thoughts, and that you are able to place your work within a larger tradition.

A Plan B creative thesis involves the same creative and intellectual work as a Plan A. It is simply shorter. Students should work with their committee chairs to determine whether Plan A or B makes most sense given their particular needs, constraints, and goals. Every creative thesis must include a critical introduction that places the work within a larger conversation. These are typically ten to fifteen pages for Plan A thesis projects and potentially shorter for Plan B. Much of the work you do for your thesis proposal—especially the literature review and the section on structure—will aid you in writing your

critical introduction. Work with your committee to determine the length and particular parameters for your project. No creative thesis will be accepted without this accompanying document.

1. Topic

In this section, your goal is to describe the prevailing themes of your work and/or the questions at the heart of your project. Those writing poetry and fiction theses may find it most appropriate to explore the *themes* they will be addressing, typically two or three larger ideas that their work centers on. For example, the loss of innocence, the mutability of the natural world, how a relationship unravels. Creative nonfiction writers might feel more comfortable naming the *questions* that they are asking: what does a certain moment in your past have to say to the rest of your life, what is the relationship between natural history and personal history, how does one recover from trauma?

Whether asking questions or stating themes, your goal in this section is to describe why the questions/themes matter (to you as a writer and to others) and how your approach is like and unlike other writers. While your thesis will have a literal subject (which will be described in detail in the next section), here you are getting at the deeper subject. Potentially the themes/questions will intersect with one another, and you can describe why this intersection is particularly useful. In other words, why are you framing your work the way you are and how will the juxtaposition of these ideas move your reader? These themes and/or questions need to be clearly stated and then elaborated on because much of the rest of your proposal (as well as your thesis itself) relies on them. You need to choose between one and three questions/themes to explore; if you have many more, your committee will most likely feel you are not focused.

2. Structure

In this section you need to address both your choice in genre and your choice of form within genre. You will need to demonstrate that you are familiar with the conventions of your chosen genre and have made choices based on those conventions. Your committee will be looking to see that you think in sophisticated ways about genre and that your choice of genre aligns seamlessly with the themes you are exploring or the questions you are asking.

In this section, you will also need to describe the literal structure of the piece. For poetry, what is the arc of your collection of poems, how will the individual poems move to form a greater whole? What choices have you made in terms of formal or free verse poetry? For fiction, what are your organizational or underlying principles (plot, character, imagery, or something else) and how do those decisions reflect the theme of your work? For nonfiction, you will want to address choices between lyric, linear, or modular forms, the scope of the work, the stance of the narrator, the use of research. In all cases, you want to make sure your committee understands literally what your work is about, as well the connections between form and deeper subject.

3. Literature Review

In this section you will return to the themes and/or questions that you addressed in your opening paragraphs. Here you need to summarize and discuss the work of other writers whose work bears

upon each theme/question you are exploring and whose work bears upon your choices regarding the form your work has taken. A literature review does several things:

- It helps provide a context in which to locate your work, showing the existence of a creative conversation/tradition in which you are about to participate.
- It establishes your readiness to enter the conversation, showing that you know the appropriate literary tradition.
- It allows you to shape the conversation, giving your own reading of what has been written so far about the topic and the forms that have been used to approach it.

Your literature review should be organized by the themes/questions and structure you developed earlier. There should be an inherent connection throughout your proposal between what you are writing, why you are writing, and how you are writing, and these connections are informed by both personal experience and the literary tradition. Your literature review will include both examples of the themes/questions you are exploring (meaning poems, stories, or books that center on the same themes), as well as examples of critical and creative essays and books about your genre (for example, writers who discuss fragmented form or confessional poetry).

4. Procedures

This section must demonstrate how you plan to undertake your project. What have you already written? What must you still write? What research will you undertake—interviews, field visits, observation, journaling? All creative work has a research component to it—even if that research is simply listening to conversations at the local diner to learn about dialog. Here, you need to describe the actual labor of your project—what will you need to do, when, and how?

5. Outline

You will need to provide a tentative outline of your thesis, with chapter/section headings and a few lines of explanation under each. As in the literature review, it may help readers if you include transitions to help explain the rationale for your organization of the thesis. Your readers will want to know why you have divided it this way and why you have chosen this sequence for the sections. Help them see and understand the logic of your organization.

6. Timetable

Problems occur in thesis defenses most often when committee members have not had time to read the thesis, to make suggestions, and to see those suggestions incorporated in a revised version that they have time to read before the defense. Your proposal should include a schedule that you plan to follow for completing the research and writing the thesis. Bearing in mind the Graduate School's deadlines and your own plans for graduation, identify a tentative defense date and work backwards from that. Meet with your committee to determine deadlines that are appropriate for all involved. At the very least, make sure your timetable meets the deadlines listed below:

- Submit first complete draft to committee members *at least 4 weeks* before defense.
- Draft should be returned to you with comments *at least 3 weeks* before defense.
- Schedule defense date with the Grad School *at least 2 weeks* before defense.

- Resubmit revised draft to committee at least 10 days before defense.

You may conclude this section by identifying the first or next step you plan to take in your project.

7. Bibliography

The bibliography at the end of your proposal should be a list of works you have cited and or consulted. Like the rest of your thesis proposal, it needs to demonstrate a deep understanding of the field. Follow the citation style favored in your field—e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago, Turabian, etc. You should also download the Publication Guide for Graduate Students at USU here:

<https://gradschool.usu.edu/files/Publication-Guide-2023.pdf>