

CCA MFA WRITING THESIS HANDBOOK

2025–2026



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Introduction

Your MFA Thesis is the capstone of your time at CCA—a culmination of four semesters of intensive study and writing. It should demonstrate excellence in one or more genres: nonfiction, poetry, fiction, or approved hybrid/multi-genre forms.

While your thesis is yours to conceive and complete, you'll do so in close collaboration with your Thesis Director and Reader. These mentors guide your project's development and serve on your thesis committee.

Creative writing at CCA embraces interdisciplinary approaches, so we encourage innovative projects. However, your concept must be clear, approved by your committee, and show graduate-level mastery of craft and revision.

Your thesis will consist of work generated in workshops and seminars, carefully revised to showcase your strongest writing. Additional material may be added at your committee's direction.

The Fall Gateway in Year 2 will help you sharpen your vision, articulate goals, and identify craft areas to strengthen as you work toward completion.

Length guidelines:

- Prose: ~100–125 pages (excluding bibliography)
- Poetry: ~40–60 pages

These are working drafts, not finished books. You'll refine these pages into your final thesis with your committee's guidance.

Timeline highlights:

- Early Fall: Submit your thesis proposal to your committee and the Program Chair.
- Spring: Two committee review meetings and the final thesis reading.
- Graduation requirement: Submit your thesis to Vault.

Key Dates

The Thesis Proposal

September 22, 2025

Your 5–6 page double-spaced proposal will include:

- Part One: Summary of your thesis (genre, themes, projected length).
- Part Two: Personal statement situating your project within your larger literary goals and broader personal/cultural/political contexts. This includes influences, scope, and intent.
- Part Three: Short annotated bibliography, noting how each resource informs your thesis.

Submission of the First Draft

Feb. 5, 2026

- Email to your committee and Program Chair
- The Director will provide comments (via email).

If revisions are requested, a second proposal is due by October 8.

Final Thesis Submission Deadline

April 6, 2026

Structure of the Review Meetings

You will have two formal one-hour committee meetings in Spring of Year 2:

Candidacy Review

- Timing: February 23–27, 2026
- Receive in-depth verbal feedback on your draft.
- Get recommendations for revision.
- Opportunity for questions and discussion.

If your work does not meet program requirements at this stage, your committee will let you know before the Final Review.

Final Review

- Final Thesis Submission Deadline: April 6, 2026
- Review Dates: April 27–May 1, 2026
- The committee assesses whether you've met the requirements, including how you integrated feedback.
- Discuss next steps for post-graduation revision.
- Committee members will provide 1–2 pages of written feedback at the meeting.

Note: All meetings are held on CCA campuses during regular business hours. Students may request to record meetings (recommended) but must clear this with their Director in advance.

Structure of the Thesis Committee

Your committee consists of a Thesis Director and a Thesis Reader, both of whom are typically selected from MFA Writing faculty (though with approval, you may choose Readers from other programs for subject/genre expertise).

You'll begin planning with your Thesis Director at the end of Year 1 (Spring semester), discussing summer goals and creating a reading and writing plan. Your committee will work with you through the fall and into the spring semester, meeting with you in person twice during the spring and helping guide you to your final submission and public thesis reading.

Role of the Thesis Director

Your Thesis Director is your primary mentor for the thesis process. They will:

- Serve as your main reader and editor.
- Run formal meetings: Fall Gateway, Candidacy Review, and Final Review.
- Guide revision strategies and techniques.
- Offer reading recommendations and research approaches.

Help you articulate and refine your ideas.
Provide written and verbal feedback.
You may request additional meetings, subject to your Director's availability.

The Director is also responsible for coordinating with your Reader, managing committee feedback, and ensuring you're meeting program expectations.

Key responsibilities at a glance:

- Keeping you on track
- Supporting your revision process
- Teaching critical thinking and writing
- Sharing resources and expectations
- Preparing you for reviews
- Providing progress updates
- Communicating committee recommendations

Role of the Thesis Reader

Your Thesis Reader offers additional perspective and support during the process.

They will:

- Attend the Fall Gateway, Candidacy Review, and Final Review meetings.
- Provide feedback and suggestions alongside the Thesis Director.

You can also request meetings with your Reader outside the formal schedule, depending on their availability.

Fall Gateway Presentations

Dates: September 16–20,
2025

During this week, you'll
present the work you
completed over the
summer to your committee
in a ~45–60 minute session
(in person preferred, but
Zoom possible if necessary).

Other MFA community
members (Program Chair,
faculty, peers) may attend if
you wish.

Purpose:

- Clarify your goals.
- Articulate your vision.
- Start a collegial, in-depth conversation about your project.

Think of this as a working
session, not an exam. It's
your chance to lay out your
plans and get guidance
before writing your formal
proposal.

Chair's Addendum #1: The Gateway Presentation

Overview

Gateway Presentations are individual meetings between each student and their thesis committee.

The Gateway Presentation is your opportunity to take stock of your project, share your vision and goals, and receive thoughtful guidance from your committee as you move toward completing your thesis.

Purpose of the Gateway Presentation

The Gateway meeting is not a test. It's a structured, collegial conversation designed to help you:

- Clarify the scope and aims of your thesis
- Articulate challenges you're facing
- Receive early-stage feedback to guide your work

Presentation Format

- Plan to speak for 15–20 minutes about your project.
- Your committee meeting will last approximately one hour total, with the remainder of the time devoted to discussion and feedback.
- Ideally, these meetings should take place in person, though remote options can be arranged if necessary.

What to Cover in Your Presentation

Here's a recommended structure for your 15–20 minute talk:

1. What You're Writing

- Offer a clear, specific description of your project.
 - Instead of: "a collection of essays," say: "a series of coming-of-age stories set in 1990s Seattle."
 - Instead of: "a novel," say: "a speculative fiction narrative told from the perspective of a tree."

2. How You're Writing It

- Describe your creative approach and formal strategies.
- How has your concept evolved during your time in the program?

3. Your Project's Meaning in Context

- How does your work contribute to the broader world of literature?
- Discuss its historical, cultural, or theoretical resonances.
- What conversations or debates does your work enter?

Chair's Addendum #1: The Gateway Presentation (Continued)

4. Your Personal Connection

- How did you come to choose this topic?
- What drew you to it initially?
- How has your understanding changed?

5. Craft Considerations

- Discuss aspects of your writing you consider strong (style, characterization, plot, world-building, poetic devices, etc.).
- Be candid about areas you want to develop further this year.

6. Influences

- Cite authors and texts that directly inform your project.
- Be specific—draw on the reading you've done during your MFA.

Important Notes

- Avoid reading at length from your manuscript. Only share excerpts if absolutely essential for context.
- Aim for clarity over exhaustiveness. You don't need to detail every chapter or poem—highlight the most distinctive or important aspects.
- Situate your work. Think of how it fits in larger conversations and traditions.

Preparation Tips

- Write it out first. Treat it like an essay: 15 minutes of speaking equals about 7 double-spaced pages.
- Practice aloud. It's fine to use notes but avoid reading verbatim. Familiarity with your text will help you speak confidently and naturally.
- Rehearse to ensure clarity and timing.

Meeting Structure

- 15–20 minute student presentation
- 40–45 minute conversation with your committee, who will offer feedback on your vision and goals and make suggestions for next steps as you move toward the first draft submission in spring

Chair's Addendum #2:

First Thesis Draft

Overview

You may be wondering: What exactly counts as a “draft”? Every professor and committee member will have their own expectations, so be sure to discuss this directly with your Director and Reader. Below are guidelines from the Chair describing what makes a strong, productive thesis draft for your committee review.

1. A Draft Represents Your Best Work at This Stage

A good draft is the strongest version you can produce before sharing it. Think of it this way: in workshops, it's frustrating for everyone when feedback goes to fixable problems that the writer simply hasn't tried to address. As a writer, you may know where the weaknesses are—but the act of submitting a draft means you've taken those issues as far as you can on your own. No one expects perfection or that every craft problem will be solved, but you should demonstrate serious effort to make the work as good as you can before asking for feedback.

2. A Draft Is Clean

Your draft should be polished and carefully proofread.

- Grammatical errors, typos, and formatting issues get in the way of meaningful feedback.
- Don't think of “clean-up” as something reserved for the final submission.
- Reading your work aloud is a proven strategy for catching errors and awkwardness.

Remember: you want your committee's energy to go to your ideas, structure, and craft—not basic corrections.

3. A Draft Is Complete on Its Own Terms

Completeness doesn't necessarily mean “done,” but it does mean coherent and executed to the best of your ability.

- It's better to submit three strong, well-developed chapters or essays than six half-formed ones.
- Strong sections demonstrate your sense of purpose, your control over form, and your readiness to go deeper.
- You should feel some pride in what you hand in.

4. A Draft Is Substantial

This is a graduate-level thesis project.

- For prose, the final thesis target is ~100-125 pages, and for poetry it's 40-60 pages.
- At the draft stage, aim for at least half that length (approximately 50 pages).
- For poetry, discuss equivalent expectations with your committee.

Substance matters: your committee needs enough material to assess your vision and offer meaningful guidance.

(Continued)

Chair's Addendum #2: First Thesis Draft (Continued)

5. A Draft Asks for Questions, Not Answers

Your committee won't solve your project for you.

- A strong draft provokes questions about character, plot, voice, form, argument, structure.
- These questions are what will help you refine your own answers in revision.
- For example, in a novel draft, your committee will look for evidence of plot shape, compelling characters with rich problems, and a sense of pacing—even if all of these still need work.

Final Thoughts

Your goal with this draft is to show your committee where you're going and to give them enough material, clarity, and polish to help you get there.

Approach the February deadline as you would any professional milestone: with focus, pride, and attention to detail.

Chair's Addendum #3:

Final Thesis Review

Overview

Final Thesis Review Meetings are one-hour, in-person discussions with your committee held on campus.

Unlike the earlier committee meeting (the Candidacy Review), which was guided primarily by faculty feedback, this final review is led by you. Faculty will arrive prepared to engage thoughtfully with you and will provide 1–2 pages of written feedback at the meeting.

Purpose of the Final Review

This meeting is your chance to present and discuss your thesis in depth with your Thesis Director and Reader.

The goal is to demonstrate how you have:

- Responded to committee feedback on your first draft
- Revised and strengthened your thesis
- Reflected critically on your creative process

This is a culminating academic conversation—a professional, collegial opportunity to articulate your vision and growth.

Preparing for Your Review

Your focus should be on explaining your revision process and decisions:

- How did you address the feedback you received in the first review?
- What changes did you make, and why?
- What challenges did you encounter in revision?
- How does your thesis now align with (or diverge from) your original intentions?
- How does your work relate to others in your genre?

Suggestion: Don't limit preparation to your committee. Talk with other faculty mentors you've worked with in the program. They can offer valuable insight and help you anticipate the types of questions you'll face.

Chair's Guidelines Addendum #3: Final Thesis Review

Presentation Tips

Plan for a 20–25 minute presentation. Your talk should cover:

- **Origins:** The topics, questions, or themes that led you to your project.
- **Methods:** How you addressed those questions in your writing.
- **Creative Breakthroughs:** Key moments in your process that advanced your project.
- **Significance:** What your thesis project means for your growth as a writer.
- **Future Directions:** How you plan to further revise, what publication opportunities you foresee, and your next steps post-graduation.

Note: You may read briefly from your thesis if it helps clarify a point, but avoid making reading aloud the focus. Save that for your thesis reading event!

During the Review

Your meeting will have two parts:

1. Your Presentation (20–25 minutes)
2. Committee Discussion and Questions (remaining time)

What to expect in the conversation:

- Committee members will ask you questions about your thesis and your process.
- They may also discuss the work among themselves, offering differing perspectives or even challenging ideas.
- This is normal and productive!

Advice for handling questions:

- Listen carefully. Committee members may take time to frame their questions or include explanatory context.
- If unclear, repeat the question to confirm your understanding.
- Don't rush. Pause to think before answering.
- It's okay not to know everything! Be honest about gaps in your thinking.

Strategies for responding:

- Acknowledge uncertainty, but try to answer as best you can.
- Repeat the question, take a moment to think, and use what you do know to craft a response.
- Express curiosity about the question—what would you need to know to answer it?
- Note that the question raises interesting implications and explain what they might be.

Chair's Guidelines Addendum #3: Final Thesis Review

Common Questions to Anticipate

While many questions will be specific to your work, these are typical prompts in a final thesis review:

- Tell us about your revision process.
- What works or authors informed your approach?
- Which writers most influenced your topic and method?
- What guided your craft choices?
- What do you see as the weaknesses in your thesis?
- Where have you made the most progress as a writer?
- Where do you see gaps in your craft?
- What cultural or literary conversations is your work part of?
- What are your next steps as a writer?

Suggestion: Write out your answers to anticipated questions and practice saying them aloud. Don't memorize them word for word—be flexible and authentic—but get comfortable discussing your work clearly and confidently.

Final Thoughts

Remember: Your committee is there to support you. This meeting is a capstone experience meant to honor the hard work you've done and help you look ahead to the next stage of your writing life.