

English Department—Distinction Theses Information and Best Practices

Practical Matters (Before Declaring Intent to Write a Thesis):

Eligibility:

- Critical theses: students must have completed (no later than the beginning of their senior year) at least five 200-level or above English courses and must have a GPA of at least 3.5 in English courses.
- Creative theses: students must have completed (no later than the beginning of their senior year) at least three Creative Writing courses and must have a GPA of at least 3.5 in English and Creative Writing courses.

For any questions about eligibility, please contact the DUS.

Finding an Advisor:

Please seek out your advisor and talk to them about the project ahead of the application deadline. Your advisor should help you understand the scope of the project and explain their expectations for the thesis-writing process. An advisor may be an English professor whom you have had classes with before, or a professor who works on material close to your subject and receives approval to advise your project. It's important to remember that writing a Distinction thesis in the English department is a rigorous, time-consuming but frequently worthwhile process. Make sure that you and your advisor have agreed upon work expectations regarding before you agree to pursue the thesis.

Application requires:

1. Critical or Creative thesis application, *with a signature from your anticipated advisor of the project*
2. a project description (300-500 words)
3. basic bibliography (Critical theses only; one page single-spaced) for the project
4. one writing sample of approximately 8-10 pages from an English or Creative Writing course

Application deadline: April 15, 2025

If your thesis is approved, then the DUSA will be in touch on how to enroll in coursework for it (see below)

Structure: Theses are usually conducted as two independent studies—in back-to-back semesters—with an advisor. Less commonly, students will enroll in one “home seminar” (in the first semester) and one independent study. Home seminars entail enrolling in a course closely associated with your topic and will require extra reading and writing assignments, in agreement with the professor.

Coursework: The first independent study (or home seminar) counts toward the major, usually as an elective. The second independent study counts as a “ghost credit” that constitutes at least an

11th course in the major. In other words, while students must take 10 credits to graduate with an English major, Distinction students must complete 11 total courses. For each independent study, your advisor will also assign you a grade for each semester.

Best Practices and Tips (While Writing)

Length: Distinction theses should fall *between 40 and 70 pages long*. This is a *highly recommended* page range. You may choose to write more on the side, and you may ask your advisor what they can mentor beyond this page limit. But writerly discipline is an important part of the thesis project, and readers can only realistically evaluate this many pages in the short evaluation period.

Meetings: As most theses are set up as two independent studies with your advisor—taken in back-to-back semesters—you can decide with them your best meeting structure and frequency. Generally, advisors meet with students every week or every other week. Meetings can last from anywhere from one to two hours. Your advisor may want you to do extra readings or assignments that ultimately help you compose your thesis.

First-Semester Writing: Everyone works at different rates. But each semester's independent study requires a grade, and usually there must be enough writing to justify this grade. So

- For Critical theses, the DUS office *recommends at least a draft of a chapter by the end of the first semester*.
- For Creative theses, the DUS office recommends *close to a full draft of the entire thesis by the end of the first semester*, with the understanding that the second semester will be reserved for careful revision.

Regardless, be clear with your advisors about their expectations for this evaluation, especially in the first semester.

Reserving Time; Citations, Proofreading: The end of the thesis-writing process can be very time-consuming. Make sure to leave time for finishing citations and proofreading; polish is one of the criteria for evaluation.

Submission: You should submit your final thesis, as an electronic .pdf file, via email to DUSA Michelle Dove: michelle.dove@duke.edu.

Evaluation (After Submission):

Evaluation and Rubric: Your thesis will be read and evaluated by three professors: your advisor and two other professors in the English department. Each type of Distinction thesis—Critical and Creative—has an available rubric that you should review with your advisor so that you know the terms of evaluation. [See pages below and/or the “Resources and Forms” on the Duke English Distinction website for both rubrics] After all evaluations are submitted, you will also receive written feedback from your advisor and/or the other readers.

Distinction Levels: In the English department, there are three possible measures of a Distinction Thesis: *High Distinction*, *Distinction*, and *No Distinction*. The levels are determined by the evaluations of the readers (and, in the event of disagreement, intervention by the DUS). Distinction levels will appear on transcripts, but note that they have no bearing on your grade for the independent stud(ies), of which your advisor is the sole arbiter.

Awards: There are several awards associated with both Creative and Critical Distinction theses. Your advisor, or a reader, may nominate you for one or more of these awards. These awards will also be announced during an awards ceremony near the time of graduation. [See previous winners on the Duke English Distinction website]

Distinction Day: The English Department has instituted a Distinction Day for all thesis writers. This is an event open to the public in which you give a short 10-15 minute presentation about your thesis topic and/or read excerpts from your work. You are encouraged to speak at the event (and invite friends and family!), but the event is optional to all candidates for Distinction. You will not be evaluated on your presentation at Distinction Day.

Resources:

Samples: Sample theses are available on the English Department website. Please look at them to understand the scope and structure of the projects:

<https://duke.app.box.com/folder/120290168992>

CRITICAL THESIS EVALUATION

Critical theses will be evaluated by the following criteria:

- 1.) **Participating in a Critical Conversation:** Does the thesis articulate or respond to a central problem or question? Does it demonstrate—via research and engagement with sources—how this question fits into a larger critical, historical, or theoretical conversation?
- 2.) **Argumentation:** Is the argumentation compelling and clear throughout the thesis?
- 3.) **Originality/Style:** Does the writer have an authoritative and/or original voice? Does the thesis have something new to say or advance its points in an original way?
- 4.) **Structure:** Is the thesis clearly and consistently organized? Is it relatively easy to understand transitions between sections and chapters?
- 5.) **Citations/Polish:** Does the thesis use citations correctly and consistently, and does it avoid writing and proofreading errors?

The final Distinction level will be determined by the collective weight of the three thesis recommendations. In cases where Distinction levels are unclear, the DUS will be the final arbiter.

CREATIVE THESIS EVALUATION

Creative theses will be evaluated by the following criteria:

- 1.) Form, Structure, Scope, and Pacing:
- 2.) Attention to language, voice, image, and detail
- 3.) Overall effect and originality:

Note: The final Distinction level will be determined by the collective weight of the three thesis recommendations. In cases where Distinction levels are unclear, the DUS will be the final arbiter.