

# M.A. DEGREE PROGRAM

## GRADUATE STUDENT HANDBOOK

This Handbook details policies and procedures for graduate and post baccalaureate students in the Departments of Communication Studies and Television, Film and Media Studies (**not** including MFA degree students). It contains information on University policy, as well as policies and regulations that are unique to the Departments. The policies and procedures in this handbook apply to both options of the Communication Studies MA degree program unless otherwise stated.

In addition to the policies contained herein, students should also consult their College handbook (<http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/al/gradhand.htm>) and the current University Catalog for additional information on selected items.

Students **must** be familiar with the regulations and policies governing their degree programs. Ignorance of policy is **not** an acceptable reason for failing to complete a requirement.

### Status of Enrollment

**“Classified” student status:** Students are considered “classified graduate students” if they have successfully completed any required conditional coursework and have an official coursework program—approved by your area grad advisor—on file in the Associate Dean’s office.

**“Conditional” programs:** If you are on a conditional program, you need to finish all courses (and the GVAR/WPE) on the conditional program with an average 3.0 GPA before starting classes on the regular program. If for some reason a course on your conditional program is not offered in a timely manner, you need to talk to the graduate advisor about a substitution.

After completing the conditional courses, or upon enrollment, meet with the graduate advisor as soon as possible to plan and record your individual coursework program. This provides you with the road map for your graduate career. If for some reason you desire to change this program, you need to confer with the graduate advisor the quarter before you

hope to make the change. If it is agreed that the change is merited, you will need to fill out a course substitution/deletion form.

**Probationary Status:** Graduate students who fail to make normal progress toward their degree objective, or who fall below the minimum grade point average are subject to University regulations governing Probation and Disqualification. Students should consult the University Catalog for detailed information on these procedures. The basis for scholastic probation and disqualification in the College of Arts and Letters is as follows:

1. Students whose GPA for courses in their master's program falls below 3.0 will immediately be placed on scholastic probation. This will be for a maximum of two quarters or completion of 16 units, whichever comes later. Failure to correct the deficiencies during the time allotted will result in disqualification from the program. **Once disqualified, students may not return to the program from which they were disqualified.**
2. Students whose GPA in all courses taken after becoming classified or conditionally classified falls below 3.0 may be subject to probation or disqualification, using the same guidelines as given above. The recommendation to be placed on probation in this circumstance may be initiated by the department or the Associate Dean.
3. Students who fall more than 9 grade points below 3.0 are subject to immediate disqualification, in accordance with University policy. It is most important for graduate students to understand that any WU received in a course (Unauthorized Withdrawal) is counted immediately as an F for the purposes of grade point calculation. The same is true for a grade of I (Incomplete) that is past the one-year limit. Incomplete grades become equivalent to an F after one year if they are not corrected, or if the student has not been approved for an extension through the Office of the Associate Dean of Arts & Letters. The instructor involved, the department chair and the graduate dean must approve extensions of incompletes. An Unauthorized Withdrawal or an Incomplete that is past the limit will drop three grade points per unit of enrollment.

## **Times to Remember**

**(A) The first quarter you are enrolled you must take the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE).**

This examination is listed as UNIV 400 in the Schedule of Classes. Passing the WPE satisfies the Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR). Failure to register for the WPE will void enrollment for that quarter. If you hold an earned doctorate or master's degree

from an accredited college or university where the primary language of instruction is English or if you can document that you have already passed a comparable examination as an undergraduate or graduate student the degree or exam may substitute for passing the WPE.

**(B) Advancement to Candidacy--after completing 16 units within your degree program you should apply to Advance to Candidacy.** The Advancement to Candidacy Review is an opportunity for the student and the faculty to determine if the program is a good match for the student's interests, abilities, goals, and performance. It is a moment, early in a student's program of study, when the student can decide whether or not he/she should continue in the program. It is also a moment when the faculty reach a similar determination.

To apply for Candidacy Review a student must meet the following criteria:

1. Students must be Classified (have an approved program on file in the Associate Dean's office). Conditional students cannot apply to Advance to Candidacy;
2. Have satisfied the GVAR by taking and passing the WPE or satisfying this requirement using the comparable routes explained above; and
3. Have completed a minimum of 16 quarter units from an approved program with 3.0 or higher GPA with no outstanding Incompletes.
4. You must attempt to advance before completing 24 units.

To fulfill the Advancement to Candidacy requirements, you will undergo an evaluative process referred to as the Candidacy Review.

1. Candidacy Review will be held at the end of Fall, Winter and Spring Quarters.
2. By the 7th week of the quarter you hope to advance, you must submit to the mailboxes of the faculty in your Option a request for candidacy. This request includes the following:
  - 2 page essay articulating professional goals
  - 1 page essay discussing initial thoughts on thesis or comprehensive exams and justification for choice.
3. Your review will be judged according to the following:
  - Your writing as demonstrated in classes taken
  - Your statement of goals and justification for final project (thesis or comprehensive examinations)
  - The Faculty's judgment of your ability to accomplish the stated goals

4. Option faculty will address any concerns about your progress directly to you in a meeting scheduled for the end of the respective quarter either with the entire option faculty or with the graduate advisor.
5. When appropriate, faculty might suggest you visit the writing center, take a writing class or other classes relevant to your needs. These classes could address either developmental or professional needs.

Remember, Advancement to Candidacy is not automatic. In some cases, the faculty may decide not to advance you to candidacy and end your tenure in the program.

If this Review is successfully completed you will then need to submit an Advancement to Candidacy form (GS-10).

**(C) Within your first year of the program:** You need start thinking about topics for your thesis if you intend to seek permission to pursue that option.

**(D) As you near completion of your program:** In order to graduate, you must apply one quarter before expected completion of requirements. See Schedule of Classes for dates.

## **Guidelines for Theses**

A thesis is the written product of the systematic study of a significant problem. It identifies the problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, and thorough documentation.

The thesis has both a written and an oral component. Students must successfully demonstrate mastery of the subject matter, research methods, results, and conclusions to pass this culminating activity.

**The Parties.** The following guidelines are informed by the following major parties, whose responsibilities are outlined below (adapted from the Guide to Preparation of Masters' Theses and Project Reports).

**Responsibility of the Thesis Pre-Committee and Committee Chair.** The pre-committee Chair guides you through the prospectus process. The committee Chair guides you through the completion of the written thesis. Usually the pre-committee and committee Chairs are the same person (see below). The Chair assumes a special mentoring role to help you excel and assures that your work is of high quality and will reflect positively on you and the department. Thus, the Chair is especially alert to assure that you have the proper preparation in terms of coursework and research skills to pursue the proposed research and scholarship. The Chair also interacts with you as appropriate, coordinates the efforts of other pre-committee and committee members, and generally assures that the research and the document itself meet the expected standards of quality.

**Responsibility of Thesis Pre-Committee and Committee Members.** The pre-committee is responsible for the prospectus/step outline and the committee is responsible for the thesis. Once faculty members agree to serve on either the pre-committee or the committee, they are responsible for reviewing all submissions by you in a timely fashion and for offering appropriate constructive responses. They are further responsible for meeting with other pre-committee/committee members to perform duties and assessments as needed.

**Responsibility of the Student.** Students themselves are ultimately responsible for the successful completion of their prospectus and thesis, including submission of information and drafts in a timely fashion.

Theses must evidence originality and independent thinking, appropriate form and organization, and a rationale. The student responsibility includes not only completing the work of the thesis itself in a professionally competent manner, but also knowing and adhering to all university, school, and department requirements and deadlines related to the master's thesis. It also entails adequate and regular contact, as appropriate, with faculty members and pre-committees and committees.

## **Thesis Prospectus**

**The Prospectus:** The prospectus (10-20 pages) is a written rationale for the proposed study. It should include: Statement of Research Problem and Question, Purpose/Rationale, Significance/Justification, Literature Review, Methodology, Limitations, and Bibliography/References.

## A. Summary of Initial Steps:

1. Choose a three-person (minimum) thesis pre-committee of faculty members who agree to work with you on developing your thesis. In consultation with the faculty, one of these members will serve as your chair and must be a full-time faculty member. At least two members of this pre-committee must be from the Option in which you are enrolled. At least one quarter before you seek prospectus approval, you must submit the “Request for Pre-Committee” form.
2. Pre-committee members are available to assist you during the course of your work. Secure approval of the prospectus from your pre-committee chair and members **before** circulating your prospectus to all faculty in your option. No later than Thursday of the 7th week of the quarter you plan to defend, submit copies of your prospectus to mailboxes of all full time faculty in your Option. Failure to do so will result you not being able to defend until the following quarter. You need to defend the prospectus at least one quarter before you plan to defend the thesis. Students cannot defend a prospectus and thesis in the same quarter.
3. After submission of your prospectus, you will have a prospectus defense meeting with faculty and/or a faculty advisor. At that defense, the faculty may approve your prospectus, require further revision and resubmission of the prospectus after revision, or deny the option of continuing the prospectus/thesis project.
4. After your prospectus is approved, you must file a Request for Thesis Committee (GS-12) form with the appropriate signatures obtained. Once this has been submitted, you have an official committee. At least 2 members of this committee must be from the Option in which you are enrolled.
5. If you have not already done so, submit a Course Substitution (GS-5) form deleting the Comprehensive Exam (596) and substituting Thesis (599) units—minimum of 4 units, maximum of 6 units. Indicate proposed breakdown of thesis units by term (for example, 2, 2, 2 or 2, 4). Register for 599 units, using the Independent Study Approval form.
6. Once you have successfully defended your prospectus, you may begin to enroll in 599 units. Remember that it is difficult to change tracks to the comprehensive examination once you start taking these units.

**Failure to progress.** If the student's Pre-Thesis Committee unanimously concludes that the student has NOT made sufficient progress in the writing of a prospectus or successfully defended a prospectus within a year of forming the pre-thesis committee, the Committee can vote to dissolve itself. If this occurs, the student will be directed to complete the culminating experience through comprehensive examinations.

## **B. The Thesis--Procedures and Defense**

1. Most likely your pre-committee will also serve as your committee (see below) and your pre-committee Chair as your committee Chair. Committee members are available to assist you during the course of your work. It is your responsibility to keep these committee members apprised of the development of your thesis.

2. Write the thesis. This usually takes a minimum of 2-3 quarters of intensive work. The committee chair, the other members of the committee, and yourself determine the working relationship between the three parties. Some committees prefer to read drafts of chapters as they are completed; others prefer to see a completed draft of the entire thesis. Make sure that all participants are clear on how your committee functions.

3. Defend the thesis. A completed draft of the thesis is due at least 3 weeks before your planned defense. The committee has 2 weeks to determine whether the draft is defensible. The oral defense must be scheduled no later than the 10th week of the quarter. Once a defense date is set, the date cannot be moved, except for an emergency. If the student misses any of these deadlines, the student must wait until the next quarter to defend.

Thesis defenses are public, and may be attended by faculty other than the committee members as well as outside guests.

4. After a successful defense, submit the final thesis, incorporating all changes and suggestions made by the thesis committee, as well as the required signature pages, to the University library. Thesis preparation guidelines, including instructions regarding electronic submission of your project, as well as the schedule for thesis workshops (offered every quarter) can be found at: <http://www.calstatela.edu/library/guides/thesisprep.htm>

5. Once you complete your thesis you will not receive a credit (CR) grade for 599 until you receive a Completion of Thesis Project memo from the Associate Dean's Office. Until completion of the thesis, you will receive an SP (Satisfactory Progress) for all 599s.

Note: If you have previously enrolled in all allowable thesis units (4-6) and do not need other credit coursework, you must register for COMS 900 for quarters in which you plan to consult with faculty and use university facilities. You must be enrolled for the term in which you file the thesis.

**Procedures for a change in both pre-committee and committee for theses.** There may come a time when it becomes necessary to change the make-up of either a pre-committee or a committee. The reasons for this change may include, but are not limited to, a committee member who is on leave or sabbatical during pivotal quarters or a shift/change in focus of the thesis. Unless there are mitigating circumstances, no more than one pre-committee and one committee member can be changed.

If either the Chair of the committee or 2/3 members of the committee were changed from the pre-committee, your prospectus/step outline would need another defense. If either the chair of the committee or 2/3 members of the committee are changed during the writing of the thesis (after the committee is official) the project may need another defense.

Note: The composition of the pre-committee does not automatically dictate or constitute the composition of the formal thesis committee, although usually the pre-committee and committee are the same. This option of flexibility is important for both the student and the faculty member.

**Procedures for a student-initiated change in pre-committee/committee**

1. If a student desires to change her/his pre-committee/committee, she/he should first consult with the pre-committee/committee members.
2. If the student and pre-committee/committee are unsuccessful in negotiating a change then the student should consult the chair of the Department. The chair will try to mediate between the pre-committee/committee and the student.
3. If this mediation is unsuccessful, the student should appeal to the Department Grievance Committee.

**Procedures for a faculty-initiated change in pre-committee/committee.** Faculty members participate on student thesis pre-committees/committees in a pedagogical, professional and voluntary capacity. A faculty member can refuse to be on a student pre-committee/committee. A faculty member who chooses to be on a student pre-committee/committee, at any stage, and wishes to remove themselves must follow the below policy:

1. If a faculty member desires to remove her/himself from a pre-committee/committee, she/he should first consult with the other pre-committee/committee members and the student.
2. If the faculty member and the other pre-committee/committee members and student are unsuccessful in negotiating a change then the faculty member should consult the chair of the Department.

## Comprehensive Examinations

“A comprehensive examination is an assessment of the student's ability to integrate the knowledge of the area, show critical and independent thinking and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The results of the examination evidences independent thinking, appropriate organization, critical analysis and accuracy of documentation.”

-The Educational Policy Committee

The comprehensive examination (offered Fall and Spring quarters) contains both a written and oral component. The written exam has three 2-hour sections. For COMM students the sections are Communication Theory, Rhetorical Theory, and an area of specialization. For Telecomm and Film students the sections are Research Methods, Criticism and an area of Specialization. You must inform the Graduate Advisor of your area of specialization at the beginning of the quarter examinations are to be taken. The oral defense provides you with the opportunity to clarify and extend what you have written in each section. **Students who choose to drop 596 must do so within the “No Record Drop Deadline” or it will count as a “fail.”**

**Scoring.** Each of the three sections of the examination will be evaluated by a committee of 3 faculty members from each Option with a 5 point scale used for both the written and oral component of each section: 5--Exceptional, 4--A, 3--B, 2--C, 1--D, 0-F. A score can be

determined through consensus of the three faculty members or through tabulating the average.

You must receive at least a score of 2 in one component and a 3 in the other component for a minimum total score of 5 in each section. A total score of 10 will be noted as exceptional.

Below are examples of students' scores:

	Rhetoric	Communication	Specialization
Written	3	2	4
Oral	2	2	2
Total	5 (pass)	4 (fail)	6 (pass)

	Methods	Criticism	Specialization
Written	3	2	4
Oral	2	2	2
Total	5 (pass)	4 (fail)	6 (pass)

**Re-write.** In special cases where the comprehensive examination committee believes there are extenuating circumstances affecting a student's performance on the written exam, s/he may be allowed to re-write a section before being permitted to take the oral. Students who are re-writing should speak to the Graduate Advisor before the re-write. The re-write will be in-house with a prescribed time limit.

**Directions for Written.** The Exam, proctored by the Graduate Adviser, is offered the 7th or 8th week of the quarter and is closed book, closed notes. Computers can be used. Students are provided with a copy of the question/s and their answers immediately after each examination. Faculty meet to discuss answers the 8th or 9th week of the quarter. Students should be contacted with their scores on the written components. Those cases of "special circumstances" rewrite their answer/s the 9th week of the quarter.

**Directions for Orals.** Orals will be held the 10th week of the quarter; time, and place determined by each 3-person faculty committee. Each oral for each section should take approximately 20-30 minutes. No notes or books are permitted. Students can have a copy of the question/s and a clean copy of their answers. Students typically begin with a 5-minute

response to extend, clarify, or correct their written work. The rest of the half-hour is questioning by the committee.

**Failure.** It is University policy that if the student fails a component of the exam, the student will have to wait until the next cycle to take that component of the exam again.

- If a student does not at least receive a score of 2 or higher in the written section of the exam, the student will not go on to the oral in that section.
- If a student receives a combined score of less than 5 in any section, she/he has failed that section.
- If the student fails any section twice, he/she will not be allowed to retake the examination.

### **Notes**

1. Once a student has taken 596 units, she/he cannot change to the thesis track.
2. Under special circumstances, a student can request a faculty member not serve on an evaluation committee.
3. Copies of former examination questions are on file in the main office. The originals cannot leave the building.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **1. What is the Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR)? I write well--do I still have to take it?**

All CSU grad students, including the strongest writers, must meet the Graduate Writing requirement. If you have not taken the WPE (Writing Proficiency Exam) or a comparable writing exam during your B.A., you will need to take the WPE at Cal State LA. This should be done within the first quarter of your enrollment in the graduate program. You will not advance to candidacy until you have passed this exam.

### **2. Why am I a "conditionally admitted" student?**

Many graduate students we invite to study in this department are “conditionally admitted.” This simply means that the faculty assessing your academic records have required additional, preparatory coursework specific to your stated degree objective. This is

designed to prepare you for success in graduate (500-level) seminars. Upon completion of this prerequisite coursework, with a GPA of 3.0 or above, you will have the opportunity to become a “classified” graduate student.

### **3. How many independent study (COMS 598, COMM 499 or TVF 499) course units may I apply toward my MA degree?**

A total of 8 units of independent study (not including thesis units) may be applied toward your MA degree requirements.

### **4. May any of the courses I took as an undergraduate count towards my M.A?**

In some cases an upper division course you took may count on your conditional program, if it applies well to your course of study. Also, some 400-level courses taken after admission to the M.A. program may count as elective credit, if pre-approved by the Graduate Advisor. However, in almost all cases, undergraduate units may not substitute for 500-level graduate seminars or coursework.

### **5. May I receive graduate program credit for graduate courses taken at another school?**

It is possible, so you should talk with your grad advisor as early as possible if you have specific transfer courses in mind. For master’s degrees that require 45 total units, such as ours, no more than 13-quarter units of acceptable transfer, extension, and/or special session courses may be included in the degree program.

### **6. What is advancement to candidacy?**

Advancement to candidacy is an opportunity for faculty to review your academic progress after the completion of at least 16 graduate-level units. During advancement, you submit to all full-time faculty in your option (by the 7th week of the quarter) a 2-page essay articulating professional goals, and a 1-page discussion of your initial thoughts regarding the thesis or comprehensive exam options.

Advancement is part of the continuing process of review of your progress, and is not automatic. In some cases, the faculty may decide at this point in time to end your tenure in the program.

## **7. When should I advance to candidacy?**

Sooner rather than later. You should plan to advance to candidacy after you become a classified graduate student, have satisfied the GVAR, and have completed 16 or more quarter units with a 3.0 or higher GPA with no outstanding incompletes. **You must attempt to advance before completing 24 units.**

## **8. What if I receive a grade lower than a C?**

A grade of C is allowed on the program; however, any grade below C, including C-, requires that the course be repeated with both grades computed in the grade point average.

**Students must maintain at least a B (3.0) average to retain good standing.**

## **9. Should I take the thesis or the comprehensive exam option?**

This is not an easy question to answer. Much of this depends upon your individual goals. You should recognize that both options are designed to be challenging, so choosing one or the other simply because it is perceived as “easier” sometimes leads to disappointment.

## **10. Can the Chair of my Thesis be from outside my Option?**

No, not unless there are extenuating circumstances.

## **11. Can I have faculty members from other departments serve on my pre-committee or committee?**

Yes, but consult with the Department members of your pre-committee or committee before making such decisions.

## **12. What if I fail one section of the Comprehensive Exams?**

You will have the opportunity to re-take that section one time. If you fail that section a second time, you will not receive your M.A. degree.

**13. Once I defend my thesis prospectus and begin work on the thesis, may I switch to the comprehensive exam option?**

A student cannot unilaterally switch from thesis to comprehensive exam option. However, in close consultation with the thesis committee, this is sometimes allowed.

**14. Typically how long does it take to finish the MA degree program?**

Coursework is typically finished over 6-8 quarters, depending on course loads. Additional quarters are sometimes devoted to thesis completion or preparation for the comprehensive exam.

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