MA THESIS GUIDELINES – CCNY ART HISTORY [updated 12/14/17]

The MA thesis is a requirement for completing the MA in Art History, and an option (with faculty approval) for students pursuing the Art History MA with a concentration in Art Museum Studies.

Undertaking an MA thesis requires the student to work closely with a primary reader (aka thesis advisor) who is a member of the CCNY art history faculty, and with a second reader (also from CCNY art history faculty, or, if necessary, from another institution where a specialist is willing to fulfill this function without compensation).

An MA thesis is a publishable-quality 50-60-page paper that contributes original research to a particular field or discipline. The thesis must contribute new material and ideas to the chosen topic, and must be well written and organized as well as properly formatted.

The thesis requires an original argument; it is more than a simple “overview” of a topic. Primary research is a must. For example, a Latin American/Latino(a) topic requires the author to conduct research in Spanish and to be up-to-date with the most current literature. Most importantly, the thesis needs to be analytical, critical, and objective. It must include visual analysis and should demonstrate an awareness of art historical methodologies.

MA theses typically pass through multiple drafts before completion. It is best for students to submit polished drafts—i.e., thesis advisors do not serve as editors, so drafts must be proofread before submission. Questions about MA thesis topics—regarding structure, thesis, etc.—are best discussed with the thesis advisor before submitting proposals or drafts. Students should plan well in advance in undertaking the thesis, and should work with readers to establish a timeline for submission, reading, revisions, and final submission.

MA thesis proposals - process & guidelines

Once a member of the Art History faculty has agreed to serve as thesis advisor, the student must first produce a proposal outlining the thesis topic and approach. This important document needs to be approved by both first and second readers before being considered for approval by the Art History faculty at a monthly faculty meeting during the academic year. Students should expect to write several drafts of the proposal with the first reader and incorporate comments from the second reader before submission to the faculty for final approval. A strong proposal will facilitate producing the thesis in a timely and efficient manner, and will directly inform the introduction of the thesis.

The text of the proposal can be no more than six pages. The text should be double-spaced with one-inch margins on all sides, and the typeface must be Times Roman, 12 point, or Arial, 11 point. The proposal must include footnotes, which should be single-spaced in 10-point font, and must follow the exact subheads as outlined below. Students should look carefully at the guidelines below in tandem with the rubric for thesis proposals, as well as Kate L. Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[I] COVER PAGE
Student name / working title / name of first reader / name of second reader

[II] THESIS TOPIC INCLUDING BASIC ARGUMENT AND LARGER KEY ISSUES
This section should be approximately two or more paragraphs. It should identify the thesis topic including precise dates, and should also address the larger historical context and identify the key issues at stake in the project. The student needs to demonstrate that he/she has thought critically about the chosen project, and to introduce the basic argument, or thesis statement. Remember: a thesis takes a stand on an issue, argues at least one clear point, and is precise enough that the topic can be addressed in 50-60 pages.

Here it is also important to explain the rationale for the scope and structure of the project. For example, if the thesis will focus on an art movement and discuss the work of three artists, it is important to explain why these three artists have been chosen. What common trait can be identified in the life and work of the three artists that is not apparent, or perhaps less apparent, in the life and work of other artists associated with the movement? Alternatively, the author might indicate how the three artists are different enough within the movement such that they represent a clear and balanced sense of diversity in terms of age, region, race, etc., that is crucial to the basic argument of the thesis.

In the thesis proposal as in the thesis itself, all choices and claims must be supported by evidence. The author must also demonstrate that the chosen approach is well founded and analytical.

[III] REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE
The review of the existing literature will vary in length depending on how much has been published on your subject. It should address books, articles, theses, dissertations, websites, etc. Ask yourself: How has your subject been discussed in the academic literature to date? What kind of bias(es) might exist? What are scholars neglecting to address in terms of your subject matter? You might consider organizing your bibliography in a chronological format, so that you can see trends in the literature clearly. Do recent authors tend to follow the logic of a previous scholar blindly? Please note that in this section you will not likely be able to comment on every published text related to your subject. You will have to make broad claims and provide evidence by concentrating on the most significant sources.

Each of your paragraphs should address one idea related to your subject. For example, if you are addressing the work of three artists related to one art movement, you might have one paragraph on the literature related to the art movement in general, followed by a second paragraph addressing the literature related to the three artists, followed by a third paragraph contemplating the literature regarding one or more of your key issues.

Your ultimate goal in this section is to identify clearly one or more holes in the literature that your MA thesis will address.
[IV] CONTRIBUTION
This section, which is typically one paragraph, should explain succinctly how your project will make a contribution to the field of Art History and/or Museum Studies. You should explain your methodology and your approach to your research. What kind of primary source material will you draw upon? For example, will you be interviewing anyone? You should explain how your methodology and plan of research will enable you to prove your basic argument.

[V] CHAPTER OUTLINES
Your thesis will include an introduction, two or more chapters, and a conclusion. Each of your chapters should be distinct; none should repeat another chapter or your introduction or conclusion. Each section is unique and serves a precise function. In two or three sentences explain what you will discuss in your introduction, or how you will introduce your subject. This section is where you need to identify the different aspects of the larger historical context related to your subject matter.

Each of your chapters, which will be summarized in separate paragraphs in your proposal, and should have its own individual basic argument. Explain what you will prove in each chapter. When determining the structure of your chapters, please consider the best way to develop your overall argument for your thesis. You may choose to divide your subject matter chronologically or thematically. Or you may choose to focus on case studies in terms of artists, exhibitions, historical events, etc.

Each of your chapters should be logically divided and demonstrate a sense of parity, such that each addresses your subject and your basic argument specifically, and each will likely be relatively equal in length. Please be careful to make sure that one or more of your chapters are not too big and will not digress from the specific nature of your topic and argument. Please also avoid the common problem of having your first chapter serve as some kind of second introduction. For example, if your subject matter is three different exhibitions held at one museum, you may not want to have four chapters, with the first one serving as a general history of the museum and the following three addressing each exhibition. The potential problem with the first chapter is that it may be too long and unwieldy, and digress from your main argument, which is the three exhibitions related to the museum’s history and other issues. Instead, you should consider having only three chapters, each addressing one exhibition. The general history of the museum will be factored into the introduction and each of the chapters as necessary. Please check with your advisor to determine the best chapter breakdown for your project.

Your conclusion is your final paragraph. You should remind your reader of your basic argument and address the importance of your topic today. What further issues are useful to consider related to your topic?
ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS
These sections will not count as part of the six-page limit, and follow after the proposal:

Images: You should include illustrations when necessary. Your images must be clear, and you must provide a figure number along with complete caption information including artist, title, date, medium, and collection below each image. In your proposal, you should include the corresponding figure number after you provide the title. Here’s an example: Pablo Picasso painted Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Fig. 1) in 1907. Figure numbers should be consecutive throughout the text of your thesis proposal, and the order of your images must follow that enumeration. Do not renumber your figures for each chapter.

Bibliography: You should include an annotated bibliography for your thesis proposal. You must follow the Chicago Manual of Style and provide one or two sentences evaluating each source. Your bibliography should demonstrate that you have exhausted all the library’s databases that are relevant to your topic.

Appendices: Some projects may warrant one or more appendices, such as tables, charts, and other types of data. See Turabian, A Manual for Writers, for the proper style.