

# THE MASTER'S **WRITTEN THESIS** handbook

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<http://feed.risd.edu>

ARCHITECTURE  
DIGITAL+MEDIA  
DESIGN—GLASS—  
INDUSTRIAL DES  
ARCHITECTURE  
METALSMITHING  
ARCHITECTUR  
PHOTOGRAPHY—  
SCULPTURE—TEA  
IN ART+DESIG

E—CERAMICS—  
A—FURNITURE  
GRAPHIC DESIGN—  
SIGN—INTERIOR  
E—JEWELRY &  
G—LANDSCAPE  
E—PAINTING—  
—PRINTMAKING—  
ACHING+LEARNING  
N—TEXTILES

Who but an artist fierce to know—not fierce to seem to know—would suppose that a live image possessed a secret? The artist is willing to give all his or her strength and life to probing with blunt instruments those same secrets no one can describe in any way but with those instruments' faint tracks.

—Annie Dillard

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→ ***This guide to thesis development is best used in discussion and negotiation with your Graduate Program Director and other thesis advisors. It may also be used as part of a workshop structure to explore in conversation with others the ideas and possibilities most appropriate to your own work.***

Verbalizing design is  
another act of design.  
—Kenya Hara

Language is a sense,  
like touch.  
—Marshall McLuhan

## A Note from the Dean of Graduate Studies

Artists, designers, critics and educators find many ways to clarify and crystallize our thinking; among them, writing is one of the most effective and renewable. Writing is transportable, flexible and mutable—constitutively free-range and peripatetic. In its countless forms—spontaneous, searching, informal, formal, analytical, poetic, free verse, scholarly, journalistic, critical—writing is one of the most agile and adaptive tools we have to understand what we attempt to do and what is actually achieved, and to invite observers and readers to engage this process from various perspectives. The written thesis at RISD resists the formulaic and yet, in its many remarkably diverse manifestations, provides a dependable prompt to travel with our ideas in anticipated directions, if often to unimagined destinations. Restlessly hovering on the boundary of closure and emergent potential, the written thesis seeks to articulate the character of a body of work and a way of thinking about it, while offering insights on essential, if not fully articulated, ideas.

This remarkable handbook is a navigational instrument offered to assist each graduate student through the development of an independent, distinctive process of writing about—and with—one’s work. I extend genuine thanks to Anne West, Mary Banas and Jen Liese, as well as a dedicated group of Graduate Program Directors who have shaped the content and form of this book and continue to support a vibrant culture of critical thinking and courageous writing throughout the community of graduate students at RISD.

**Patricia C. Phillips**

Dean of Graduate Studies

# GRADUATE SCHOOL AND THE MASTER'S WRITTEN THESIS

To enter graduate school is to begin **an academic rite of passage** to a more advanced stage of art and design activity.

For a brief period of your creative life, **a seam of unfettered time is opened**, permitting intense artistic and intellectual immersion.

Within **a supportive environment of makers and critical thinkers**, a highly evolved exploration is sustained.

During graduate study you will be sufficiently challenged as you search wide and deep. With time and scrutiny, accompanied by the input of faculty, fellow students, visiting artists and designers, layer upon layer of your work will be revealed and opened up for examination.

The graduate experience can be transformative. Turning your attention exclusively to making and learning will precipitate quickening of vision. This inevitably leads to critical shifts in both your work and working process. As a process, graduate study involves three phases. Initially, established states of knowing are suspended or rejected as new knowledge is invited. Subsequently, in the pursuit of discovery, a transitional period occurs. Within this phase there is a sense of being at a threshold. That is, betwixt and between what is old and what is new. Much potential is unlocked in this time. The personal shape of your work emerges and forms as you imagine what it might be and then proceed to strengthen the work's end. The final stage of the



passage requires that the understanding acquired during the process be brought to the community. This reflective awareness is an act of both release and resolve.

This handbook addresses the third phase of the graduate academic passage. It focuses on the act of articulation. The project of unearthing and documenting the underlying dynamics of your work into a written thesis is intended to help enlarge your understanding of the themes that are present in your work and facilitate stronger communication with others.

It takes one to three academic years, full time, to complete a Master's degree. In conjunction with the culmination of a cohesive body of studio work, as a Master's candidate you are required to complete a written, illustrated thesis in order to graduate. While most students entering graduate school anticipate an in-depth study of a visual nature, the expectation of a "written thesis" often creates confusion. Questions frequently asked are: Why produce a written thesis? If the objects of one's creative practice come through materials, not words, why rely on words to determine the work's meaning? "Is art not art as art?" to recall the words of Ad Reinhart. What should a thesis look like? Does one have to write an academic treatise? What content must be covered? How long should it be? What happens when I am frozen over the blank page?

There is no universal standard regarding theses prepared for art schools. Knowing that guidelines and a list of resources would be helpful to our students, we went in search of supportive material. The Office of Graduate Studies offers this handbook to assist you in the preparation of your written thesis. Our goal is to help you work smoothly and effectively in the fulfillment of this degree requirement. We encourage you to think of your written thesis as an extension of your studio practice. It will help to strengthen the position of your work, generate future developments in the work, and offer the opportunity for a retrospective evaluation of your work.

# THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE WRITTEN THESIS

## the-sis

(thē'sis) *n.*, *pl.* the'ses (-sēz)

[ L.< Gr. *thesis*, a position, from *tithenai*, to put, place, to set down]

The term “thesis” is inherited from academic tradition. It denotes a formal paper that follows certain conventions of form and content. Usually fifty to one hundred pages in length, it is prepared for a Humanities Master’s degree. To produce a thesis, one must undertake a passage of scholarly research. A specialized subject is addressed and new discoveries are presented in competent written discourse. The document must be a publication of original thinking. Its purpose is to share learning. The thesis generally concludes with the defense of a theoretical point of view. To fulfill your graduation requirement, it is not imperative that you complete a “traditional” graduate thesis.

Within schools of art and design, where the intelligence of the eye, hand and brain are respected, the definition of a “thesis” is extended. The skill of the maker’s hand (kinesthetic intelligence) and the interpretive role of the writer’s hand (linguistic intelligence) are viewed integrally. There is no split based on determinations of the hand and the mind. The whole individual is engaged in order to grasp and communicate the concepts based in one’s creative work. Centrally, a Master’s thesis refers to a self-defined area of investigation, culminating in a final exhibition presentation. What is evaluated is a cohesive body of original studio work, visual in nature. To achieve the advanced academic standards of the profession demanded by this terminal degree, a student must demonstrate an ability to masterfully make his or her ideas visible. The thesis must show the highest level of involvement.

While the practices of art and design are often not generated from words (unless language is a component or exclusive feature in one’s work), the paradox is that you must talk about them. The purpose of the written thesis is to encourage clear and effective communication. Regarded as an opportunity to assimilate thoughts and experiences that are part of the graduate exploration, the written thesis is an important component of academic commitment.

Rigorously clarifying thoughts and processes, well-crafted sentences will bear the reasoned foundation of your work. The time spent writing will provide the occasion to deepen commitments and ideals, and to organize, focus and articulate ideas for presentations and critiques, which are an integral part of graduate study.

Most importantly, the thesis will provide a bridge between graduate school and post-graduate life. Written competence is regarded as essential to being a strong working artist or designer today. Good writing skills in English are considered basic equipment. Organic, direct and simple writing that renders the substance and specificity of one’s visual search is undeniably beneficial. Many Master’s graduates aspire to academic appointments. The clarity, cogency and insight demonstrated by your words will aid you in teaching, and also prepare you for public and client presentations, press releases, artist’s statements, and ongoing grant, fellowship and residency applications. In many cases, communication will be paramount to the success of your projects.

In preparing this handbook, it is not assumed that every graduate student is reluctant to write. However, we are sensitive to suspicions surrounding the dominant role that language and reasoning can take in determining the meaning of one’s studio work. Oftentimes words acquire preeminence as material modes of knowing are forced under the rubric “intellectual.” There may be fear that overanalysis diminishes the joy of making or reduces the rich dimensions of one’s work, or that the exercise of naming may impinge upon intuition.

Developing a written thesis should not siphon energy from your studio work nor impose on your thoughts, expressions or actions. This requirement is not intended to sever a relationship with your creative practice. Rather, the act of writing will enhance visual communication. The insights born of the written thesis will be unique, rewarding and foundational to your work. The process of bringing one’s work to language may not be what you are trained to do; yet, by putting these conceptions down on paper, you will find your way to the bones underlying your work. A thesis enables you to learn what you already know. Your work will lead you as a writer and the act of writing will direct further work.

I am a maker, of course. We all are. We may love to read and even to write, but when considering the thesis process at RISD, it is the labor of our hands that comes to mind first. Even though I was writing on and off when I began my thesis year, I saw the writing component as an onerous extra, something to be circumvented so that I could get on with the real work of completing my thesis body of work. I think it is safe to say that a lot of incoming graduate students feel this way, and a few of the outgoing ones as well.

Several months after beginning my thesis, I became aware that writing and making are part of the same journey, and that one informs the other. Over time, I understood that I had become engaged in the process of tackling the same issues in the studio and in my thesis. Happily, this process was catalyzed by my thesis committee's suggestion that I write while I make. Taking their

advice allowed me to clarify and contextualize both writing and making, and to delve far more deeply into my subject matter.

Now, after graduating RISD, I find writing so compelling that I continue the reading/writing/making process, for it is putting me in touch with other makers and thinkers and educators in a variety of fields. The conversations about our work and our thoughts keep my work focused and meaningful. Far from being an onerous extra, the discipline of the writing process and the written document itself turned out to be an important part of my ongoing studio practice.

**ZEKE LEONARD**

*Slow. Down*

Furniture Design, 2008

*What was the experience of writing a thesis for you? Responses from students.*

# SHOWING AND TELLING

1+1=3:  
Building Social  
Capital Through  
Communication  
Design

WONDER  
*celebrating the festival*

submerge

M U T E

DIY 3  
OPEN SOURCE PRINCIPLES  
IN PRACTICE

ATHINLINE

Forgotten Hist  
Object

WIDE + EYE: A Multiple Platform Collaborative System  
of a Service that can... Share and Connect that can... Operating in a Service that can...

Open Source System

BIKE



# SHOWING AND TELLING

There are various models used to understand and present accounts of visual art and design processes. For example, you might choose to format your thesis as a monograph, research paper, or bookwork (see descriptions), and within this format to adapt a structure such as a script, interview, or magazine (see list of suggested typologies on page 14). Each offers a different epistemology for art and design, and thus a different sensation of reading. Likewise, each account affects the reader's imagination differently.

Choose a format that serves the information best. Your approach should be clear and succinct, and reflect a strong working knowledge of your material. Most importantly, connect the content and form so that the thesis can be individually tailored. Be as natural and straightforward as possible. Avoid jargon. Avoid pretension. These documents are read routinely by future graduate students. Unless you decide otherwise, keep them in mind as your potential audience. Assume an inclusive voice in your writing.

Your thesis should be an expression of thought. What you attend to will depend on your intellectual orientation, way of learning and expression. The reading of your work is in some way a reading of your theory of life. As such, it will reflect the originality and independence of your thinking. While guided by your committee, you will not be shepherded onto a correct path. You can take a personal tack. Unless you are so inclined or impelled to do so, there is no need to

**Following are possible formats. They are not rigid. They simply outline approaches, ranging from analysis to expression. There is room for any of these forms in your writing. Explore past theses for inspiration.**

## → THESIS MONOGRAPH

A monograph is a treatise on a single subject. In selecting this format you are encouraged to prepare a genealogy of your thesis process. As a form of telling, this account must be a polished gem of clarity. A clear statement of the purpose, description and outcome of the thesis experience is offered. A discussion of studio investigations, including direct reference to influences, historical context and philosophical attitudes is relevant. High-quality reproductions of your work are required to illustrate the text.

## → THESIS RESEARCH PAPER

Informed by practices of art history, art criticism and/or critical theory, this format also demonstrates an act of telling. Words will be your primary means of communication. Visuals



legitimize your works with the theories of others. Do not feel forced to put on the theorist's clothes; this may only confuse your voice. The place of theory is to understand the principles that have generated actual works of art. You are making theory. Theory comes from the "inside out" of your work. Declare your point-of-view first. Assume an assertive posture. Then critically engage the writings of others as a means to strengthen the concepts which inform your work and working process.

RISD expects basic standards of excellence in preparing these documents: correct spelling and grammatically correct English. A high-quality, professional appearance is essential for all formats, as is archival durability. Note that formats may vary within departments, as criteria must be developed specifically with each student and the thesis committee. The thesis is composed in relation to the pedagogy of each department and the nature of the specific thesis work.

The documentation of your graduate search in text and image does not need to involve elaborate design. The most important consideration is that the manipulation be meaningful. As long as the text and images are nicely laid out, the articulation of your ideas are clearly integrated with the images and the whole presentation is readable, then your document will meet the standards required of this creative effort.

will be inserted as figures, tables or plates. Especially in an area of study where your thesis project needs to be supported by research and analysis, this approach will be appropriate. The audience for this paper (usually others well-grounded in your area of research) affects the language, the content and the form. Fashioned from the standards and practices of the traditional graduate thesis, a more scholarly posture is assumed.

What is produced is a written discourse, carefully executed, which registers and analyzes the core ideas and arguments underlying your visual search. This approach is concept-driven. The subject is entered extrinsically in order to decode meaning. A manageable problem of inquiry is defined, followed by a comprehensive search, and assessment of pertinent literature and precedents. The understanding of this literature is reconstructed and contextualized for the reader. The ability to think critically about the thesis problem and communicate a thoughtful synthesis of the research should be demonstrated. What you

# SHOWING AND TELLING

present is a narrative which sensitizes the reader to the social, historical and theoretical content of your work. A platform for further inquiry or creative action is projected.

## → THESIS BOOK WORK

The thesis book work encourages a meaningful reading and viewing experience in which text and image interact. Tailored to the tone and content of your material and conceptual inquiry, a clear and unified continuum of visual and verbal elements offers the story of the graduate process. Within this format the specific terms of your creative activity are mapped both as a record and exhibition of your experience and accumulated knowledge.

The thesis book work is an appropriate model for a journal-like document. Within this verbal and visual field, it is possible for the understanding gathered during the process of making and research to find their place. Type, images and layout unify thoughts accumulated through the internal relationships of making and conceptualizing. In some cases, a movement through images may become the movement through the book work. Honored as pictures of thought, the purpose of the image/text relationship is to clarify the nature of perception or the modus operandi of the imagination.

In choosing the format of the thesis book work you may extend an understanding of your creative process by expanding the dimensionality of the narrative text. Through layering your text, as well as varying the scale and character of your type, it is possible to present your thesis work as a specific site of complex interactions, which are personal, material and conceptual. Drawings, diagrams, photographs, journal notations and other graphic descriptions may be presented within the explanatory text to give variety to the texture of the whole.

The best approach to gain a sense of the book is to become acquainted with the book as physical object. Pick up a book, hold it. Feel it. Look at it, then examine it, not routinely or mechanically by habit but make a conscious effort to see at every step in the process, every movement of the eyes and hands.

—Keith Smith, *The Book As Physical Object*

# SHOWING AND TELLING

Some Art & Design Thesis  
Typologies

Artist Book  
Collected Stories  
Catalogue Raisonné  
Chronicle  
Cogent Artist Statement  
Contextualizing Document  
Degree Project Book  
Exhibition Catalog  
Expository Research Paper  
Extended Article  
Feasibility Study  
Instruction Manual  
Interview  
Liner Notes  
Magazine  
Manifesto  
Monograph  
Poetic Texts  
Proof of Concept  
Script  
Zine

DATA  
OBJECTIVE  
QUANTITATIVE  
KEYWORDS  
MICRO  
INTERSECTIONS

This writing is not meant to supersede studio work. In creating a complementary and well-articulated account of your studio research, you might wish to explore different typologies to document your theory and process most appropriately. Whatever you create, it should be a valid form for your field.

FRAGMENTS  
LOGIC  
RELATIONSHIPS  
MEMORY  
MACRO  
SUBJECTIVE  
QUALITATIVE  
VOICE

## THE WRITER'S VOICE

### Autobiographical or First-person "I" Account

Voice is more expressive and subjective. Your own experience is shared and your personality is evident. The language is strongly connotative as you provide insights into your creative process. The organization of this material is often chronological.

### Narrative Account

Extended anecdotes and stories are drawn from personal experience. The account may be subjective or objective, informal and strongly expressive or formal.

### Critical or Analytical Account

Voice is objective and scholarly. The goal is the interpretation and evaluation of largely factual and denotative meaning. In a well-argued essay you will include specific and integrated textual references, writing in the present tense.

## SHOWING AND TELLING

A long complicated sentence  
should force itself upon you,  
make yourself know yourself  
knowing it.  
—Gertrude Stein

There is a delicate form of  
the empirical which identifies  
itself so intimately with its  
object it thereby becomes  
a theory.  
—Goethe

In my work I attempt to circumvent conventions, elicit paradox and toy with layers of illusion; so it seemed only natural that my written thesis text should maintain this aura. I decided that the text itself, in order for it to genuinely follow through with its argument, should playfully deconstruct the rituals and conventions inherent to the system in which it needed to conform; not as a rebellion against the system, but to maintain its underlying theme.

The greatest hurdle for me to overcome was the separation I saw between the written thesis and the work I produced. Once I comprehended that the text and the work could play off each other what appeared to be banal turned magical. I began to author a world of my own design, a literary space based on my interests and inspirations.



I wanted to write a thesis that was the product of its own method of inquiry, and for the reader to enjoy exploring the thesis at least as much as I did. I intended the experience of leafing through the pages of my thesis to be satisfying and potentially amusing.

The adventure of writing a thesis enabled me to build a context for my work. I did not write it to please my peers; I wrote it to create them.

NEIL SALLEY  
*Musée Patamécanique*  
Digital+Media, 2006

*What was the experience of writing a thesis for you? Responses from students.*

# MAKING THINKING **WRITING**

ANALYZING  
**ASSESSING** AUTHORIZING  
COLLABORATING **COLLECTING**  
**COMPARING** CONNECTING  
DESCRIBING **DOCUMENTING**  
**EXTRACTING** INFORMING  
**MAKING** **MAPPING** MEASURING  
**NARRATING** **ORGANIZING**  
REASONING RECOMBINING  
**RESEARCHING**  
REVISING **THINKING**  
**TITLING** WITNESSING  
**WRITING**

## **THE THESIS WRITING PROCESS**

Dive right in. A thesis isn't written; it is built. It is a continuous active and constructive process developed in conjunction with your studio practice, conversations, research and critical responses to your work. Try to get the main ideas and connections on paper as they happen. The scaffolding for your thesis will evolve as you begin to identify these connections, wresting order out of chaos. Write project descriptions as soon as projects are completed and make this a habit. Make directed research a continuous part of your process. (See pages 60–67 to learn about research support at the Fleet Library.)

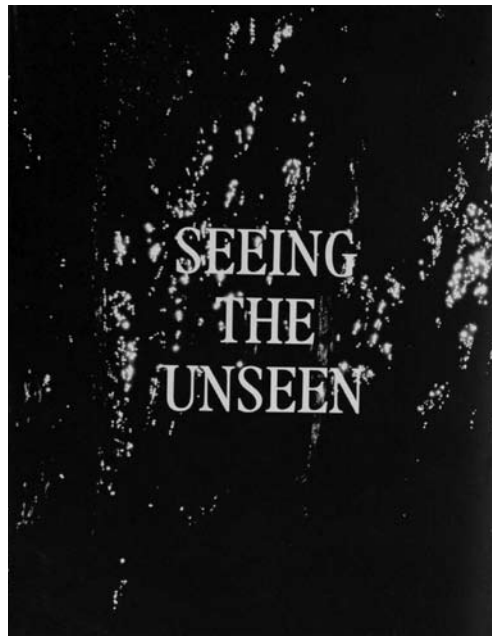
Many departments offer thesis preparation courses to advance the conceptualization and documentation of studio research. These courses include interpretive assignments, both research and written, from which to build your final thesis text. The Division of Graduate Studies offers thesis writing elective courses. These courses provide time for thoughtful reflection and support the development of different sections of the thesis text. Please consult the RISD "Course Announcement" handbook.

Remember: clear thinking and effective language are your goals. For writing support along the way, seek out a peer tutor as a partner who can help you to move through the structural elements of your writing. (See pages 68–73 to learn about the RISD Writing Center's thesis support.) Read your writings aloud to yourself or to a friend. This will help you to fine tune your writing as you listen for word choices, consistency of thought development and for any redundancies in your expression.

The members of your thesis committee are the critical readers and evaluators of your thesis document. Submit drafts in a timely manner so that you get the most from your team of advisors. Then, reflect carefully on their responses to your writing. Expect several revisions as you rethink and refine each draft. In the final stages of fine-tuning the completed thesis, work with someone to scrupulously edit for spelling errors and grammar.

I write about my own work because I want to speak for myself. I might not be the only authority, nor the best authority, but I want to participate in the writing of my own history. Why should artists be validated by outside authorities. I don't like being paternalized and colonialized by every Tom, Dick or Harry that comes along (male or female).

—Marlene Dumas



*Seeing The Unseen: Revelation  
Through the Reduction and  
Exposure of Visual Sensation*  
(back cover)  
HUY VU  
Graphic Design, 2009

The thesis turned out to be my book of ideas. It is a document in which I, two years after authorship, still discover curious phrases, utile pointers and possible bodies of work. Sometimes, these ideas within ideas generate proposals and statements of intent for residencies, exhibitions and curatorial endeavors. At other times, they remind me of and inspire new channels of studio practice.

First things first: I did not undertake graduate school to write about art. I went to make art. I went to pursue, expand and refine my artistic voice. As is probably true for you. Gratefully, the thesis writing process did exactly that for me. Instead of being a thematic rationalization or a case being argued for the work being "good," "grotesque," "important," "relevant" . . . whatever aspired virtues may be, my thesis was the opportunity to READ my own voice. That is, to tweeze out of a studio jumble, material that I was attracted to, to

acknowledge and understand patterns I saw across the board.

Over an eight-month long process that was both excruciating and liberating (which seem to, very often, go hand-in-hand if the experience is to be meaningful), I wrote seven drafts in all, four with notable differences in approach. . . . So, was the thesis-writing process an exasperating, tortuous one?

Yes.

Did the thesis make me feel like everything I did for two years was sheer drive!

Yes.

Did the thesis feel like a perfunctory academic exercise? A chore?

Yes.

*(cont.)*

But is that what I wanted it to be?

No.

And so, I'd write (freehand, focused, topical, analytical, creative . . .), decide that I did not know what I was trying to say, then think that I did not really know what I was writing about, then figure that I did not even know how to write in the first place. Yet writing found its way. Was the frustration worthwhile? Most definitely.

As I write this, I am headed to a three-month long residency where I will explore the notion of self-eroding objects—one of many phrases I unearthed from my book of ideas. But for this document, I'd have very little memory of extrapolations from my graduate work. Apart from a host of lessons learned about the dynamics between writing vis-à-vis my studio practice, *Particle Activism* reminds me of where I could go next, if I wish to listen to its words. My word for you: Hold



yourself to a standard higher than you think possible, because one tends to undermine oneself in tiredness while running the final lap of grad school. Be selfish about the thesis; do not confuse it with complacency. The thesis-writing experience can be meaningful; just be artful about it.

ANJALI SRINIVASAN

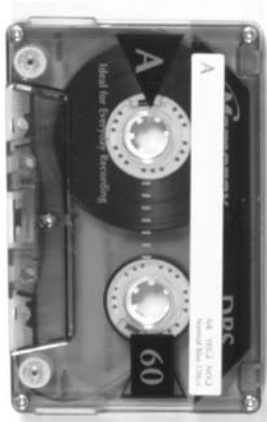
*Particle Activism*  
Glass, 2007

*What was the experience of writing a thesis for you? Responses from students.*

# BEGIN

You may wonder how to begin. Put energy into your writing from the start; that is, in the Fall semester of your first year. Do not wait until your studio work is finished to initiate the process. Do not view the thesis as a crescendo. Each phase is a stepping stone to the next. Keep moving forward. Like your material production, writing is a constant discovery of your commitment. Writing about your work should be an ongoing process. Attend to it regularly.

SELECT A FAVORITE WRITING TOOL. **KEEP A JOURNAL OF YOUR PROGRESS. SAVE EMAIL AND CHAT CORRESPONDENCE.** USE A MINI-RECORDER TO CAPTURE YOUR IDEA STREAM. **BE AN ACTIVE CHRONICLER. REGISTER THE FIRST SKETCHES OR FIRST IMPRESSIONS CRYSTALLIZED IN THE ACT OF MAKING.** DOCUMENT YOUR INTENTIONS AND SOURCES, YOUR METHODS AND MATERIALS. **NOTICE YOUR SENSITIVITIES. ENTER THOUGHTS, DREAMS, PERCEPTIONS, MEMORIES, VISUAL DATA, INSPIRATIONS, PROBLEMS, QUESTIONS AND BOOKS READ.** KEEP AN ACCURATE ANNOTATED



If ideas crowd your mind, use these devices for recording your thoughts. May no thought be wasted.



BIBLIOGRAPHY. **MAKE NOTE OF IT ALL. BUILD YOUR WORD BASE. NOTE OBSERVATIONS OTHERS MAKE IN CRITIQUES.** WRITE CONTINUOUSLY. **EXPLICATE. ANALYZE.** THINK ABOUT ALL ASPECTS OF THE WORK. **LAY OUT YOUR MAJOR IDEAS AS A POST-IT WALL. KEEP A WORD CLIPPING FILE.**

As you progress toward a clear thesis statement, choose from among the range of thoughts that have stirred your mind, those that have formed the foundations of your work. These ideas—the deep concepts—need formal fulfillment. You must feel your way through your work to what it is that you are recognizing or not recognizing. Draw from your technique, your experience, and from the guiding principles of your work. While the task may seem difficult, you must chisel away. If you feel overwhelmed, simplify. Ultimately you must reveal an ability to select, organize and demonstrate, in writing, the independent thought reflected in your studio work.

Self-criticism and external comparison are important. Take time to evaluate the ideas, processes and specific objects you make. To develop an informed perspective, move that which you intuited creatively to a place of greater external understanding. Private perceptions will be converted into public meaning. To define your area of investigation, note those whom you have studied, as models. Include the concepts of other artists that are related to or have influenced your creative work. What aspects of your field have fired



your imagination? Account for them. Research. The Fleet Library at RISD has a Readers Services Librarian, Reference Librarian, and Special Collections Librarian to help you. They will introduce you to the rich offerings of the collection. Endeavor to place your work in a cultural and historical context. Examine appropriate historical, philosophic and/or critical analyses of issues undertaken. Think about your intent within a contemporary context and about how your works call others to participate. Consider how your artistic endeavors have enriched your field.

As you write a thesis your thinking will go through a process not unlike that of making. Follow your own rhythm. Respect your point-of-view as well as your questions. Proceed with pleasure and the spirit of rich discovery. You are furthering your immersion in a process of learning and experimentation, as well as digesting and deciphering your search.

As with any quest, there will be periods of not knowing. In some cases, there will be moments when you hover in that place between what you feel you know and what you sense. The process of explaining images and artistic process



does not mean that your text must fully redeem the ambiguity of the visual. Imagination knows more than you think. Meaning and mystery are inseparable. There may be aspects of work that will remain unavailable. While direct communication and clarity are your goals, you can preserve rhythms of silence and complexity within your text. Follow the process of inquiry and read critically. And do not be frightened of irrationality. There will be more than you understand. The flavor, cadence and spirit of your writing should reflect the vision and commitment of your work. You are giving potency to the visual language, which does not mean that it has to be transformed into history and philosophy. Trust your intuition. You are mapping a set of relationships originally rendered in a visual form.

**Inspirational images, words and phrases placed on your studio walls become a generative tool, a place for your writing thoughts to germinate, a visual thinking space, a referential backdrop.**

## BEGIN

Whenever you set a detail down in language, it becomes the end of a thread... and whatever detail—the sound of a lawn mower, the memory of your father's hands, a crack you once heard in lake ice, the jogger hurtling herself past your window, will lead you to amazing riches.

—William Stafford

I keep three kinds of diaries: the written, the spoken (into a tape recorder), and my drawing diary, which is the most important. Having these various diaries means that I like to keep my house in order. They must be up-to-date so that I'm sure life does not pass me by. Most people visit me, and I like to record our conversations or our dialogs.

—Louise Bourgeois

My cadence as a maker is methodical, meditative and often slow. Likewise, when it comes to communication, I prefer to listen carefully, allow ample time for digesting and processing and then formulate a thoughtful response. While faculty and peer critiques during my first year undoubtedly strengthened my capacity for responding to queries and comments about my work in the moment, I ultimately craved a means of truly synthesizing all that was being offered up in the space of those brief but dense discussions. I recorded conversations so I could revisit them once the nervous energy of crit week had subsided, and I often turned to writing as a means of processing this abundant critical input. In the thesis year, the written document presented itself as an opportunity to verbally identify and distill the ideas driving my work on my own terms, at my own pace. The time spent shaping the language of my written thesis was—necessarily and delightfully—all mine. The document became



my own private laboratory for dissecting the work I was creating in the studio and for unearthing a layer of understanding of both my work and the forces driving it that I had not previously accessed. In the studio, new strata of the work continually emerged. On the page, new facets of my relationship to the work began to reveal themselves. As a singular sanctuary for integration and reflection, the written thesis served as a medium in the creation of my thesis work virtually as essential as the material itself.

KELLI RAE ADAMS  
*Poised Space*  
Ceramics, 2009

*What was the experience of writing a thesis for you? Responses from students.*



The written thesis is doable. There is room to experience it at your own rate; however, you must design your two years well. This timeline will help you pace your process. At each stage of this calendar you will continue to focus your visual search and define your areas of research and investigation. You will make, write and analyze. Try to maintain the joy in your work, despite constant analysis. Always look for faculty and courses that can further inform your area of investigation. Take advantage of relevant liberal arts and studio courses or Independent Study Projects (ISPs).

A time of great focus, passionate inquiry and effort toward thesis resolution. During this period the thesis topic will advance. By the end of the term the development of a clear thesis statement supported by visuals and text should be ready.

—

Try to eliminate all competing interests. This is a time to complete a first draft of your thesis.

—

All of your semester's work is devoted to the completion of a thesis exhibition and the written thesis document. Drafts will be submitted to your committee for feedback. You will design your book. The final bound document must be submitted to your thesis committee for signatures and ready for deposit in the Fleet Library one week before graduation.

FALL TERM

WINTERSESSION

SPRING TERM

FINAL YEAR: CRITICAL STAGE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN THESIS


→ Write a rough draft as early as possible. Rewrites will probably be necessary. Depending on your committee's requirements, you may have to rewrite more than once. Allow several weeks for this process. Take note of specified deadlines established by your committee.

JANUARY 2009

M

010509

TURN in Bauhaus plates @ 10AM  
to the Gelman Gallery @ the  
Chase Center.

+ Pay tuition @ Pro/Wash

+ go to O.I.T and get password change.

HokioPhz7

T

010609

EPIPHANY

+ Finish up syllabus for intro  
to GD.

+ Write Artist Statement for Bauhaus show

W

010709

+ revise open research proposal

+ open research meeting @  
ITGD @ 1:00pm to 6:00pm

+ small presentation for open research

JANUARY 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

MICRON 02 #1 ARCHIVAL INK  
Water resistant ink for permanent long lasting bright line lines  
© 2004 Pentel EnerGel Inc. Made in Taiwan

JANUARY 2009

TH

010809

need to refer to color palette.

+ finish Aspect of patterns

+ make file labels

+ work on mind map image collection

+ work on mind map lecture

place image & title.

crop & clean-up

F

010909

+ scan memories from "in memory of" project

+ crop & clean-up memories

+ work on mind map lecture for WEP. class, itgd

SA/SU

011009

011109

+ start on "Adaptation of Fit"

+ work on better proposal for re-connect -> for wednesday, to discuss with Achim

JANUARY 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

5 26 27 28 29 30 31

# YOU WILL KNOW YOU ARE FINISHED WHEN

The Graduate Studies Office does not determine the specific form or content of the graduate thesis; each department has its own guidelines. Please consult your Thesis Chair and departmental guidelines for criteria and for written thesis deadlines for proposals, outlines and drafts. Past theses, which are archived in the Fleet Library and stored in most departmental offices, can also serve as useful and inspirational examples.

One copy of your thesis book, signed by your committee members and bound, is required for graduation. This copy is submitted to your Graduate Program Director, who will deliver it to the Graduate Studies Office one week before graduation; from there it will be deposited in the Fleet Library for the school archives. While the whole thesis should be carefully considered and executed, several requirements are essential. All materials must be archivally sound. Select acid-free paper and a sturdy binding (see page 72 for printing and binding services). To protect the Library's collection, no organic materials can be included. The title page must follow the wording presented in the model on page 51 exactly (inserting your own name, department, year, etc.). The abstract must be clear and free of errors. Finally, the pages must be numbered.

In addition to the Library copy, most departments require a second copy for their archives, and of course you can make as many copies of your thesis book as you would like for yourself, family, potential employers, and so on.

Remember, the thesis book must be signed, bound and deposited in the Graduate Studies Office one week before graduation in order for you to graduate. You will receive periodic updates from your department and the Graduate Studies Office reminding you of deadlines along the way.

## THE LIBRARY READY COPY : YOUR CHECKLIST

- Official title page** *required*
- Copyright or blank page** *required*
- Dedication**
- Epigraph**
- Table of Contents** *required*
- List of illustrations or image captions** *required*
- Acknowledgments**
- Glossary of terms**
- Abstract** *required*
- Introduction**
- Body of Thesis/Chapters** *required*
- Conclusion**
- Footnotes/Endnotes and Bibliography** *required*
- Appendices/Visual Portfolio (CD or DVD)**
- Vita**

*Number your pages and spell check your document.*

- To be accepted by the library, your thesis must be carefully edited, thoroughly considered and executed, signed and bound.*

# GIVING YOUR THESIS A STRUCTURE



Required pages appear in red; optional pages in white.

## 1 OFFICIAL TITLE PAGE

*required*

This page must include:

- Title
- “A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ in the Department of \_\_\_\_\_ of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island”
- “By” author’s full legal name
- Year of graduation
- “Approved by Master’s Examination Committee:”
- All committee members’ names, official titles, departments/ institutions, committee roles and signatures

See model on page 51.

## 2 COPYRIGHT PAGE

*required*

## 3 DEDICATION

Must be brief and centered on the page.

## 4 EPIGRAPH

A quote that represents or reflects your topic or perspective.

## 5 TABLE OF CONTENTS

*required*

This page lists the various sections of the thesis and indicates the page number where each begins. Page numbering generally begins with “1” on the first right-hand page after the table of contents.

## 6 LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS or IMAGE CAPTIONS

*required*

Please include precise documentation for each image. For example, artist, title, date, medium, dimensions. Be consistent and make image





authorship clear to readers. See the Fleet Library’s “citing images” link for more information.

### 7 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This section acknowledges any individuals or organizations who provided noteworthy support and encouragement of your work in the pursuit of the degree.

### 8 GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### 9 ABSTRACT *required*

A one-page summary of the thesis that must be brief—approximately 250 words—as it is used for index searching on databases. Your abstract should be clear, succinct and an accurate representation of your thesis.

### 10 INTRODUCTION

A page (or two) that clearly outlines the concerns of the thesis. You are setting the ground for your reader

to engage your thesis inquiry fully. Announce your point-of-view through attention to core themes.

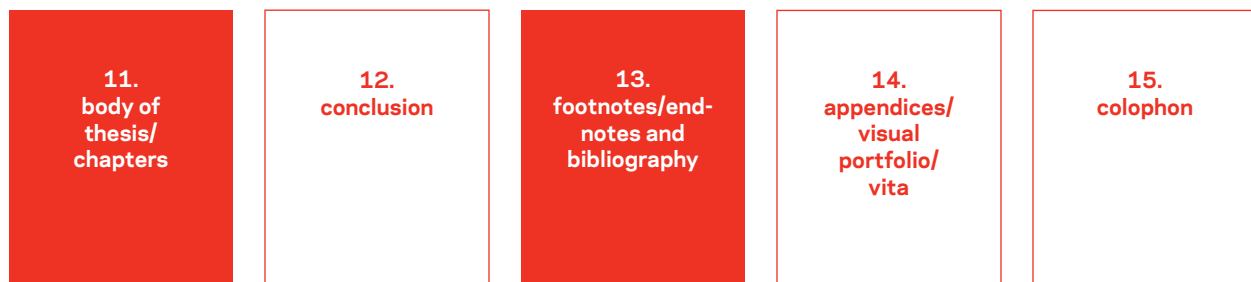
### 11 BODY OF THESIS/CHAPTERS *required*

The text section of the thesis may include contextual information such as historical movements, traditions, artists and theories that influence your work. One’s actual work should also be thoroughly presented, both verbally and visually. You might address your rationale and what led you to make the decisions that you made. What were the successes and limits of the work? What were the material and technical processes? Discuss the content and intent of specific thesis work with reference to images.

### 12 CONCLUSION

A summary page (or two) that shows the relatedness of themes and offers a synthesis. This may be an

# GIVING YOUR THESIS A STRUCTURE



appropriate place to consider areas for future development.

## **13 FOOTNOTES/ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*required*

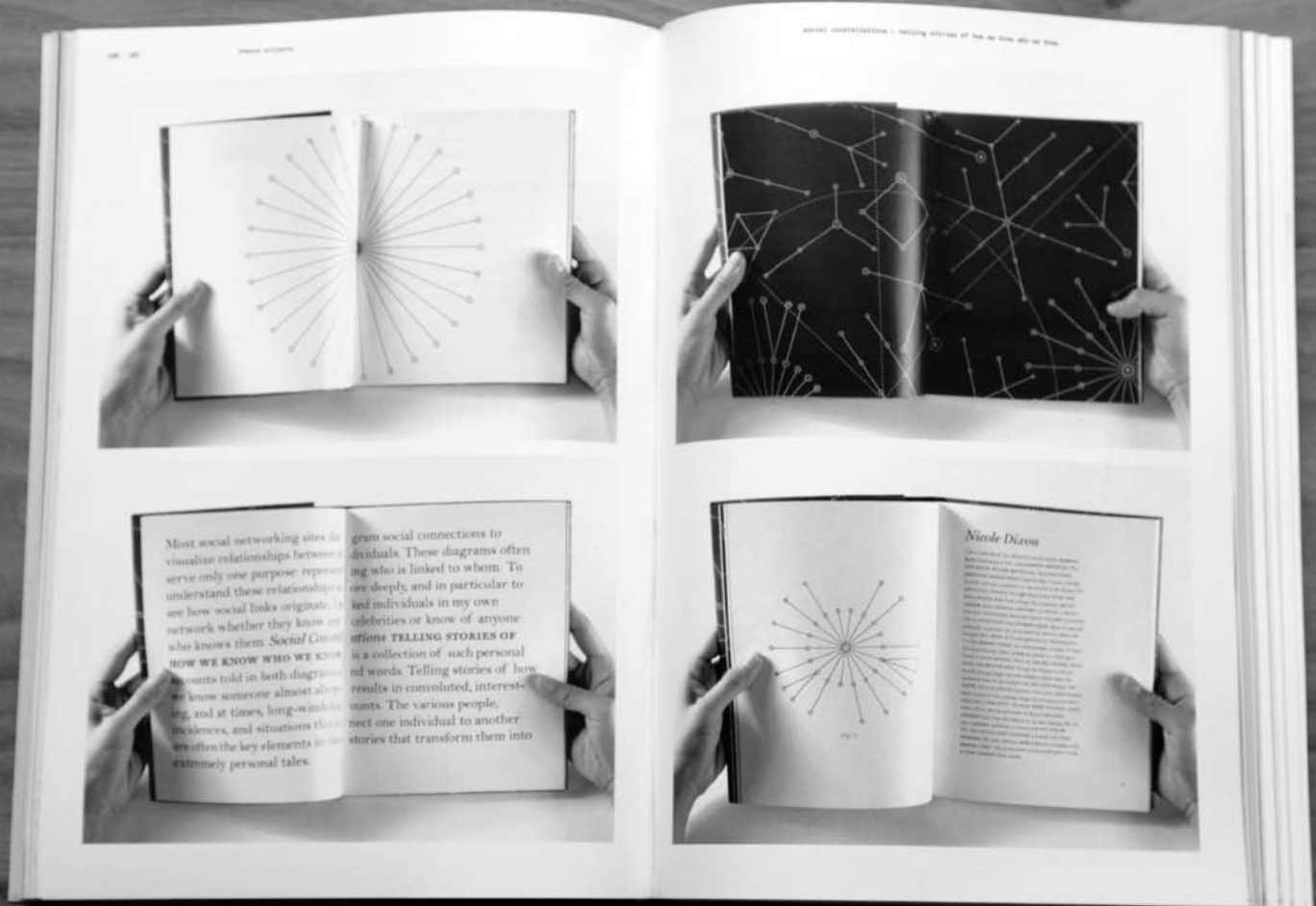
Quotes and references from outside sources must be cited in footnotes or endnotes. Literature (books, periodicals, websites) that has influenced the thesis development is listed in a bibliography, which may be annotated. Please refer to a style manual and be consistent.

## **14 APPENDICES/VISUAL PORTFOLIO/VITA**

Appendices might include supplementary material such as transcripts, process documentation, or materials research. Label CDs & DVDs with your name, degree and year completed. All disks must be in sleeves affixed to inside back cover. You may include a résumé or curriculum vitae.

## **15 COLOPHON**

An inscription listing thesis book production details such as font, printer, paper and bindery.



**Relationship Matters: Visualizing  
the Links Between Nodes**  
LESLIE KWOK  
Graphic Design, 2008

# CONSTRUCTING AND TESTING AN ABSTRACT

An abstract is an original piece of writing rather than an excerpt from your thesis. A capsule summary of your completed thesis, it is a succinct and powerful stand-alone passage which serves as **a sales pitch for your work**, attracting potential readers. It demonstrates a clear grasp of the contents of your thesis document in abbreviated form and **includes keywords that will aid researchers searching on databases.**

Generally an informative abstract is approximately 250 words.

Ask yourself: Why would another researcher be interested in your thesis? What are the most important aspects of your thesis? What are the main points from each section of your thesis? Summarize each section in one sentence, if possible. What is your thesis title? What are the subject areas you have explored? Include keywords and phrases.

Revise often to correct weaknesses in organization; improve transitions from point to point; drop unnecessary information; add important information you left out; and eliminate wordiness.

## SUGGESTED ABSTRACT OUTLINE

**INTRODUCTION:** →Motivation/Purpose **Why did you undertake this work?** →Core Question/Problem/Concept **What was the main point of the work?** What were you considering? **What was the main argument/thesis/claim?** **BACKGROUND:** What is the background that places the work in a larger body of literature/research? **BODY:** →New Context **How did the work create a new context for understanding this question/problem/concept?** →Methods + Materials **What methods or approaches were used to develop, challenge and deepen this?** What materials were used? What was the nature of your studio experiments? What did you learn?

**CONCLUSION:** →Implications **What are the implications of your work to a larger body of knowledge on the subject?** →Chapters **How are your chapters divided?**

# THE THESIS ADVISORY TEAM

## THESIS COMMITTEE

Choose your committee, an advisory team, carefully. Its members will guide and also review the developmental stages of your studio work and written thesis.

## THESIS COMMITTEE CHAIR

Your Thesis Chair is from your department and is responsible for helping you determine the direction of your thesis work. He or she is your principal resource, greatest ally and thinking partner, helping you to organize your effort, manage your time well and realize the full potential of your thesis. The Thesis Chair is responsible for signing off on the final document prior to submission.

## THE COMPOSITION OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE

The thesis committee generally includes three advisors. Ordinarily it is composed of faculty members from your department, outside your department, and/or outside the RISD community. Committee members are compensated for the time involved in serving on your committee.\* Work with your committee members regularly. Final approval of your work rests with the thesis committee, in which the Thesis Chair naturally assumes principal responsibility.

## SELECTING YOUR ADVISORY TEAM

Possible attributes might include: anchor, cheerleader, concept-pusher, critic, drill-sergeant, guide, inspirer, psychic channel, referee and time manager. It is expected that members of your advisory team meet with you (physically or virtually) at least three times throughout the thesis development and evaluation process.

\*Note: Each student's thesis committee has a budget from Academic Affairs and Graduate Studies to cover compensation for one part-time faculty member and one outside advisor. Full-time faculty members are not compensated for service on thesis committees. Students who want additional committee members must seek these additional resources from their department.



**Both students and their advisors have distinct responsibilities.  
A sample email from a student to her advisor:**

Hi Chris,

I hope you are well. I have been in touch with Amy to reserve an hour of your time on April 8th at 10am. The time that Lola Brooks will be up from New York to meet with us does not work with your schedule. So my second committee meeting will happen over the span of two days, meeting with Tracy and Lola on Tuesday and with you on Wednesday.

I have a more defined direction in my approach to my thesis topic of Collective Breath. I am making pieces that explore breath in the following ways:

1. Objects/jewelry that invite interaction and a kinesthetic experience
2. Objects/jewelry that capture the aesthetics of breath
3. Objects that record the process of breathing/conceptual recording

To follow some of my making process you may also see my blog:  
<http://goulman.blogspot.com>

I look forward to meeting with you in a few weeks. Thank you for your time and input.

Gwen Oulman-Brennan

# THE THESIS ADVISORY TEAM

I needed a hybrid committee that would reflect and broaden the scope of my interdisciplinary research. My thesis advisors came from different disciplines, and they allowed me to gain a better perspective, while stretching my ideas in different directions.

My thesis document echoes many of the words, questions, reactions and conversations that took place in my studio and that helped me uncover the essence of my work as an artist.

MARTA LABAD

*Transitory Dwellings:*

*An Investigation of Space Through Photography*

Photography, 2009





**Visual Dysmorphia:  
Experiments with Identity**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Photography in the Department of Photography of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

by

Heather Johnson  
2010

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Eva Sutton, Head, Department of Photography, Thesis Chair

Deborah Bright, Dean of Fine Arts, Thesis Advisor

Leora Maltz-Leca, Professor, Department of History of Art and Visual Culture, Thesis Advisor

**Sample title page:  
ensure that advisors'  
names are spelled  
correctly and that  
their signatures  
appear.**

# THE THESIS ADVISORY TEAM

## **Sample Graduate Thesis Committee Letter**

It is recommended that the Graduate Program Director or Department Head send each thesis committee member a letter explaining the thesis process along with contact information. Each member will know what is required in this role and will know whom to contact if they have questions.

See the sample letter on the facing page. Your Graduate Program Director or Department Head will modify the letter to include specific information related to your department.



October 28, 2009

Dear \_\_\_\_\_, *Graduate Thesis Committee Member*

Thank you for serving on \_\_\_\_\_'s *graduate student's full name* Graduate Thesis Committee. As part of the degree-granting process, the thesis review is common to all graduate programs at Rhode Island School of Design. The review is designed to provide a diverse and objective critical assessment of student thesis work from a wide spectrum of RISD faculty as well as visiting artists and critics from outside the RISD community.

Graduate Thesis Committee requirements are specific to each department at RISD. Some programs require a thesis exhibition in addition to a written thesis, while others require a final Degree Project. The enclosed information is, therefore, meant to provide general guidelines to help clarify your role on the Committee. The Graduate Program Director \_\_\_\_\_ *full name* in the \_\_\_\_\_ Department is available to answer any questions you have regarding how this process relates specifically to their respective department. Please contact him/her at \_\_\_\_\_ *telephone* and \_\_\_\_\_ *email*. The Department Assistant \_\_\_\_\_ *full name* may also be reached at \_\_\_\_\_ *telephone and email*. The RISD Graduate Thesis Committee Chair is a full-time faculty member in the graduate student's major department and is responsible for the final thesis grade.

I hope you find your experience on the Graduate Thesis Committee rewarding. Many thanks for giving your time, energy, and insight into this exciting process.

Sincerely,

*Graduate Program Director or Department Head name*  
*Department name*  
Rhode Island School of Design  
2 College Street  
Providence, RI 02903  
*email address*  
*telephone number*

If writing is thinking and  
discovery and selection  
and order and meaning,  
it is also awe and reverence  
and mystery and magic.  
—Toni Morrison

# EXCERPTS FROM DEPARTMENTAL THESIS GUIDELINES

*Please refer to full guidelines*

Here are examples of the wording used by different departments to locate their context for the Master's thesis. These descriptions are revised or refined periodically to reflect current practice in the respective areas of specialization; they are included here to illustrate the range of approaches within the School as a whole.

## **ARCHITECTURE**

### **The Degree Project Book**

The DP book is an ongoing work that includes developing thoughts and the clarification of questions. Executed by means of writing and design studies, it begins with the DP Board and concludes at the end of the Spring semester with the inclusion of reduced final drawings and photographs. The DP book is considered a useful tool to collect, present and reflect upon the student's work. The DP book includes extensive documentation of the project, a clear visual and written narrative of the research and process, a succinct outline in writing and images of the development of the project from concept to final proposal.

## **CERAMICS**

### **Thesis Documentation**

The written thesis document is not an end in itself—it is a live working document through which each graduate student can begin to shape his/her thinking and making. It will provide the reading audience with a window through which to observe the motivations and momentum of

the thesis body of work. The prime purpose of the written documentation is for graduate students to clarify—through language—the intentions, motivations and material manifestations of their work. The insight gained through this process can be crucial to successful practice.

## **DIGITAL + MEDIA**

### **Research Document**

The thesis should be an articulate research document. It is projected that this document be pragmatic—that is, it should be drawn upon to inform your future practice, become source material for journal length publications and provide the basis for a professional art/design talk. The document should critically examine and illuminate the individual's creative practice. One may define for him/herself a particular approach to this articulation in consort with the thesis committee.

## **FURNITURE DESIGN**

### **The Written Thesis**

The written thesis is intended to accelerate and enrich your growth and to contribute to the resolution

# EXCERPTS FROM DEPARTMENTAL THESIS GUIDELINES

of your three-dimensional work. The final thesis is a culmination of the intellectual content of a group of works, illustrated through writing and visual documentation. The writing should chronicle the development and growth of the pieces as well as your individual growth as a furniture designer/artist. The final manifestation of this process will be the works themselves. The final body of works together with the thesis are expected to demonstrate a level of proficiency in both process and intellect that uphold the standards of the MFA degree as well as that of the department.

## **GLASS**

### **Expository Research Paper**

The written thesis should propose an individual artistic perspective and address the derivation, development and current outcome of RISD studio work by contextualizing it in terms of relevant precedent.

The graduate thesis is to comply with the conventions of a recognized style sheet for an expository research paper and must be a minimum 20 pages of text (double spaced), not including required bibliography, footnotes/annotation, and supporting image documentation.

## **GRAPHIC DESIGN**

### **Final Thesis Document**

In the long-standing tradition of this program, you are to contain your work in book form, along with a digital version on disk (to accommodate a digital record of your book as well as any screen-based or motion work requiring digital media).

The book is a container, a gallery and an active presenter of the visual/verbal work which is your contribution to the field of graphic design.

The definition of “book” is as open as you are willing to make it—but it must serve as a fitting repository to fully, and fairly document the work and the writing you have done to support your thesis investigation. Progress on this document should be steady and planned to allow for the highest level of craft possible.

## **INDUSTRIAL DESIGN**

### **The Written Thesis**

The written thesis is to include contextualization of the thesis subject matter, summarization of the research conducted, speak to the critical thinking process that guided the evolution of the project and contain critical analysis of the project’s success and shortcomings. The document is to include images of the final body of work as well as the

process leading up to this finalization. The thesis document length is to be approximately 50 to 100 pages in length, including images and bibliography, and is to adhere with the format described by the Graduate Studies Office.

## **INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE**

### **Degree Project / Feasibility Report**

The Degree Project is the culmination of your studies in the department. As students in the final semester of the program, each of you has accumulated a substantial body of knowledge on the subject of Interior Architecture. The nine credit Degree Project is the opportunity to synthesize this knowledge, and, within the construct of a personal investigation, formulate and test a design hypothesis through the medium of a self-created degree project.

## **JEWELRY & METALSMITHING**

### **The Thesis Document as Artist Book/Artist Catalog**

Your artist book should include documentation of the majority of your thesis work. You may choose to include images of work on the body, on display or installed within a context. You may include previous pieces and/or influences if they

are relevant in nature. Your thesis writing and bibliography must be included in your artist book. You may choose to present the writing in a straightforward manner or design a structure for the writing that supports how you have been approaching your work. The format of your book is open but should be appropriate to the content of your research. Regardless of your format, your book should be thought of as a piece within the context of your thesis body of research and therefore given the same consideration.

## **LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**

### **A Thesis Book**

The final segment of a student's studies at RISD focuses on the Master's thesis. The thesis is a self-defined and self-directed investigation. It is viewed as an opportunity to develop a course of creative action—a personal working methodology—aimed at further defining fundamental underlying concerns, values, sensibilities and skills.

The thesis emphasizes the identification of a single issue (simple or complex) and the exploration and testing of this issue, and various possible responses to it, through a process of drawing and building

# EXCERPTS FROM DEPARTMENTAL THESIS GUIDELINES

and critical evaluation throughout of intention, process and product.

While research and learning to express ideas in a logically structured, clearly articulated written format is a component of the thesis, the primary mode of investigation at RISD is making. The culmination of the thesis is a thesis book and an end-of-the-semester graduate show of the students' work. The book is seen as a critical part of the overall creative process, and becomes a part of the RISD library collection. Book format: 8 ½ X 11 (portrait or landscape format) Suggested length: 30 to 40 double-sided pages

## **PAINTING**

### **Expository Paper**

The thesis writing process has four basic goals:

- to be useful to you (you should be learning about and developing your work through the writing);
- to be useful to a viewer/reader (the thesis should enhance the experience of looking at the work for someone who knows it and should introduce it to someone who doesn't);
- to prepare you for all the writing you'll have to do in the future (press releases, project proposals, grant and residency applications, letters of recommendation, etc.);
- to function as a creative exercise in and of itself (the stylistic choices you make and 'voice' you develop should reflect on the work you do in the studio).

## **PHOTOGRAPHY**

### **The Thesis Paper**

The thesis paper is not the same as a Master's thesis for an MA degree, which is a complete work in itself and documents original research. Rather, the thesis paper for the MFA degree serves as a comprehensive contextual discussion of your visual work. We are asking you in the thesis paper to be your own public advocate, critic and historian. It should include relevant historical and contemporary references to your area of investigation, drawing on references from art history and contemporary art and criticism, as well as from other fields related to the content, themes or issues explored in your work. In addition, you should discuss your visual practice in formal and material terms, explaining your decisions about the structure, format and medium(s) used, and whom you consider to be your target audience.

## **PRINTMAKING**

### **The Writing Component**

Our visiting artists and scholars, scheduled throughout the program, can have significant impact on the student's thesis projects. While verbal and written coherence are an important part of an artist's personal and professional development, much critical development takes place in the process of making the work. Visual or pictorial intelligence develops through working, in many cases bringing breakthroughs late



in the program that have a significant impact on the final direction and form of written work. This progression must be recognized and accommodated within the guidelines of the program.

## **SCULPTURE**

### **The Written Thesis Document**

The work and document should reflect the full spectrum of your research and studio practice and reflect your understanding of how your work situates itself within contemporary fine arts practice. The thesis should be the result of careful reflection and analysis of your growth over the two-year Master of Fine Arts trajectory.

A thesis is an *archaeological dig* into the sources of your work. A thesis is a *platform*, a set of floorboards to stand on, a persuasive argument for why you do what you do. A thesis is a *web* in which the strands of your thought can act, and both you and the reader can discern the patterns that emerge from the works done over a two-year time span. A thesis is a *portrait*. Above all, be true to yourself.

## **TEACHING + LEARNING IN ART + DESIGN**

### **Written Thesis**

The following characteristics are viewed as evidence of a successful TLAD candidate's thesis:

- Evidence of thoroughness of research investigation.
- Evidence of ability to structure thoughts.

- Evidence of an investigation that examines multiple sources—from the fields of art, art education and related disciplines.
- Evidence of insightful interpretation.
- Evidence that discussion and writing transcends unsubstantiated personal opinion.
- Evidence of a good grasp of the significant issues in current visual arts education.
- Evidence of risk taking.

## **TEXTILES**

### **Thesis Writing**

Undoubtedly your visual and material investigation within the thesis project forms a major part of the project. This investigation should result in a body of original work that manifests skills, deeply developed concepts, understanding of the context of the work and a fluid working process. The work should break new ground and enrich the field.

You are also required to write about your project, and this writing ought to help you analyze your working process and its results, as well as to direct further work. While individual styles and formats are welcome, addressing the following in the written thesis may help you in finding structure for your writing: rationale, context, working process, and evaluation.

# THE FLEET LIBRARY AT RISD: A RESEARCH RESOURCE

GROSSMAN IMPROVING THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND CREDIBILITY OF ART EDUCATION 8. A. 1994

HARRISON WIDER RANGE

MACDONALD PERRY MAGAZINE FOR SCHOOL & HOME

SCOTT IN SEARCH OF THE SPOTTED PONY

TONER SHAPE BETWEEN THE LINES

VAUGHAN PLAY, ART, AND THE RIFT OF FOLLY

BECKHAM THE COMPUTER OPENING NEW HORIZONS 1995

COMPTON ORIENTAL MODERNISM IN TAIWAN 1995

DANNARELL MIND BUILDING 1995

HANNESON IN THEIR OWN WORDS 1995

RECHENBERG HEDGECOCK & COMPUTERS IN THE ART CLASSROOM 1995

MASTERS  
THESES  
ARTE  
1994

MASTERS

MASTERS  
THESES

MASTERS  
THESES  
ARTE  
1994

MASTERS  
THESES  
ARTE  
1994

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MASTERS  
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ARTE  
1995



# THE FLEET LIBRARY AT RISD: A RESEARCH RESOURCE

Fleet Library at RISD  
[library.risd.edu](http://library.risd.edu)  
Library Reference Desk  
RISD Library 1st floor  
401.709.5902  
[risdlib@risd.edu](mailto:risdlib@risd.edu)

## SERVICES & RESOURCES

- individual research assistance from a librarian, by appointment
- group library instruction sessions for research projects and seminar topics
- access to Brown University Libraries and Providence Athenaeum Library
- 24/7 remote access to digital image databases and research databases in art and design
- digital imaging support for graduate teaching assistants
- online research guides for graduate students: [risd.libguides.com/gradresources](http://risd.libguides.com/gradresources)
- interlibrary loan borrowing system for books, articles and media
- set up electronic publication alerts in the catalog and databases
- RISD theses cataloged and available in the library
- artists' book collection
- picture collection
- materials library

## EQUIPMENT & FACILITIES

- classrooms with digital player/projection and network access
- group study rooms and meeting spaces
- Reading Edge machine—translates text to voice
- oversize face-up book scanner
- video viewing rooms
- copystand and light table

## GUIDED RESEARCH WITH A RISD ART LIBRARIAN

At the Fleet Library, a place for inquiry, inspiration and research, librarians are available to help you develop your thesis. Make an appointment at the RISD Library Reference Desk, either in person, by email or by phone. Appointments usually last 20-30 minutes. You are always welcome to make follow-up appointments.

Studio practice and research share fundamental traits. Both begin with open-ended inquiry. Both involve search, experimentation and discovery. They require periods of active searching and working interspersed with time for looking, reflection and introspection. Research on a visual topic often involves a process of translating the visual to

## Your thesis will engage wide and varied references.

the verbal. It begins by articulating emotions, thoughts and experience and then finding examples of those ideas in historical or contemporary cultural movements and the work of individual artists and writers.

The librarian will begin by asking some questions to get a sense of where you are in the research process and what approach you are taking to the topic. It's useful to bring any beginning writing or concept maps you have made on your topic when you meet with a librarian. Often early documents and sketches contain the themes that are central to your thesis and are a good way to begin the conversation.

Librarians will recommend databases and will show you how to access them. They facilitate in-depth searching for local resources as well as borrowing materials owned by other institutions. They can help you locate primary sources, bibliographies, images, websites and digital collections. They answer any questions you may have about your library record. Librarians write letters of introduction to research centers when your inquiry requires research at another location.

### **ELEMENTS OF INDIVIDUAL GRADUATE RESEARCH—skills artists bring to their everyday practice**

- Trace one's artistic and cultural influences
- Identify experts and publications in one's field
- Get to know organizations, research centers, think tanks and institutes relevant to one's field
- Access people and information for professional needs
- Set up a system to stay aware of significant developments in one's profession
- Archive information so that it will survive outdated access technologies
- Create a system to organize professional work and related documentation
- Develop and present work to specific audiences
- Understand copyright as it relates to one's work

### **RESEARCH SKILLS FOR THESIS WRITERS—locating, evaluating and integrating information**

- Use complex strategies to retrieve relevant information from a variety of appropriate sources, depending on the research topic

# THE FLEET LIBRARY AT RISD: A RESEARCH RESOURCE

- Identify databases and indexes and original or copyrighted materials appropriate to the project
- Use advanced research sources to locate materials such as doctoral dissertations, unpublished research, artifacts and primary documents
- Identify and locate resources in related disciplines
- Use team skills to efficiently and effectively research a topic
- Search the Internet in a targeted way
- Analyze a scenario or topic by identifying the type of information needed
- Evaluate the findings and select the most reliable information, and apply the findings to meet the need
- Locate information on various sides of an issue and assess its credibility
- Present a cogent argument as to the value and reliability of sources used
- Distinguish one's own new interpretation or original contribution from the writings of others
- Collect a broad spectrum of data on an issue to develop multiple perspectives on a solution
- Analyze the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods
- Accurately portray pertinent knowledge/information, even if it impacts the individual's value system or counters a thesis argument
- Identify information and interpretation issues that remain after the completion of a project
- Successfully obtain legal access to all text and visual materials (quotations, photographs, original artwork, etc.), and appropriately indicate permissions granted
- Apply principles of copyright

Adapted from: *ARCL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and *ARLIS Information Competencies for Students in Design Disciplines*

Compiled by Ellen Petraits  
RISD Art Reference Librarian  
[epetrait@risd.edu](mailto:epetrait@risd.edu)

## Sample RISD thesis record

<b>Author</b>	Kaly, Naomi.		
<b>Title</b>	Wading in language : [a thesis / by Naomi Kaly].		
<b>Imprint</b>	[Providence] : Rhode Island School of Design, 2006.		
<b>Full Record</b>	<b>Copy Status</b>	<b>Find Similar Items</b>	<a href="#">Print Version</a>
<b>Descript</b>	61 leaves : col. ill. ; 28 cm.		
<b>Note</b>	"Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Digital+Media of the Rhode Island School of Design."		
<b>Bibliog.</b>	Includes bibliographical references (p. 60-61).		
<b>Local Note</b>	Principal advisor: Jessie Shefrin; Associate advisors: Bill Seaman, Lucinda Hitchcock, Wendy Chun, Erkki Huhtamo. RISD thesis.		
<b>Author</b>	Kaly, Naomi.		
<b>Subject</b>	Visual communication. Language and culture. Written communication.		
<b>Alt Author</b>	Rhode Island School of Design. Dept. of Digital Media.		
<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>CALL #</b>	<b>VOL.</b>	<b>STATUS</b>
RISD ARCHIVES	DM 2006 .K35		IN REFERENCE

## ONLINE ACCESS

Each master's thesis is recorded in the library's online catalog, as well as in the OCLC, an international bibliographic database. Each thesis is classified according to the name of the student, title of the thesis, subject, department and year.

Your thesis will be read routinely by future graduate students and other patrons of the library. Past theses are used as examples in the thesis development process and represent your department to potential RISD students.

## RISD LIBRARY ACCESS

Theses are shelved at the end of the Reference section, arranged first by department, then year, then alphabetically by author with the Cutter number. Those not in book format are housed in Special Collections. Older theses are transferred to the RISD Archives. All theses are for use in the Library or Archives only. They may be lent to other libraries through interlibrary loans (for in-house use only).

# THE FLEET LIBRARY AT RISD: A RESEARCH RESOURCE

One of the seductions of painting has always been how slippery it is; how spoken or written descriptions can never pin it down. We may speak eloquently about and around the work; yet, in the end, there is always a little piece of the picture that eludes language. This seemingly intractable relationship interests me greatly. How does one write about visual art without simply presenting a list of descriptive phrases or imposing a single interpretation on something that is inherently multivalent? It is as if an object has thrown down the gauntlet and it is up to me to accept the challenge and to write about it.

As a painter who enjoys a parallel life as a writer, bridging that “problematic” gap between words and images begins with research. An ever-evolving comprehensive knowledge of art history and contemporary references is essential to building an accurate context for work. This knowledge becomes the precise, layered shorthand when lengthy descriptions become tedious. Perhaps, most importantly, doing research is a way of honoring what we do, thus deepening our art practice.

**CARRIE MOYER**

**Graduate Program Director, Painting Program**

**Assistant Professor, Rhode Island School of Design**





Musée Patamécanique  
NEIL SALLEY  
Digital Media, 2006

KEYWORDS:  
Pataphysics  
Pseudonymity  
Cabinets of Curiosity  
Iconoclasm  
Reconstructive Archeology  
Marcel Duchamp  
Alfred Jarry  
Raymond Roussel  
Intellectual Masturbation  
Digital Media  
Sensorium Installation  
Stuffed Crocodiles



# THE RISD WRITING CENTER: A WRITING RESOURCE

RISD Writing  
Center  
College Building,  
Rm. 240  
401.454.6486  
writing@risd.edu

Hours: M-Th 10-4  
and 6-8;  
F 10-4; Su 2-6  
Stop in, call or  
e-mail for an  
appointment

## SERVICES AND RESOURCES

- one-to-one peer tutoring in writing
- written thesis workshops
- support for thesis peer review
- space for group thesis meetings
- samples of exemplary written theses
- books on writing about art
- books written by artists and designers
- research manuals and style guides
- handouts on documentation, grammar, etc.
- list of thesis copyeditors

## TUTORING AND WORKSHOPS

The RISD Writing Center provides free peer tutoring in writing in a supportive environment of mutual respect to all RISD students. Tutoring is a collaborative effort designed to help students become actively engaged in developing their writing skills. Trained graduate and undergraduate tutors who are strong writers, readers and listeners advise on everything from outlining to grammar and mechanics to clarity of argument—or just serve as a sounding board. All stages and all kinds of writing—from academic research papers to graduate written theses to grant applications—are welcome at the Writing Center. We are a community of writers who encourage meaningful expression in all disciplines and appreciate its importance in the context of art and design.

The Writing Center offers a variety of support designed specifically for graduate students working on their written theses. Anne West, Senior Lecturer in Graduate Studies and the Writing Center's Liaison to Graduate Studies, and Jennifer Liese, the Writing Center's Director, in addition to teaching courses devoted to the written thesis, lead a series of non-credit thesis-writing workshops throughout the year. Here, we explore the opportunities and challenges of writing about one's own work; analyze samples of formats and typologies you might select to represent your work; address the values and methods

of research, engaging sources and responsible citation; brainstorm and draft outlines and abstracts; and contemplate the nuts, bolts and creative potential of designing your thesis book. Guest artists, designers and librarians join us to share their expertise in each of these areas. Keep your eye out for written-thesis workshop posters and e-mail announcements.

Writing Center tutors receive special training in supporting graduate students throughout the process of thesis writing. Thesis writers are welcome to consult with a tutor at any time for help with developing a thesis-writing strategy, research and note-taking tips or feedback on initial outlines and proposals. In Wintersession and Spring of the final year, when thesis writing is at its most intense, graduate students with special interests or needs are invited to sign up for ongoing weekly or biweekly one-hour tutoring sessions. Working together over time provides the tutor with intimate knowledge of your work, writing and thesis aspirations. The tutor becomes a responsive collaborator, offering critical feedback toward making your writing as effective as it can be. Frequent meetings also offer the benefit of deadlines—a great catalyst for just about every writer as we endeavor to push through the many stages of writing, from initial spark to final draft. To arrange for ongoing thesis-writing tutoring, please contact Jennifer Liese at [jliese@risd.edu](mailto:jliese@risd.edu) or 277-4829.\*

\*Please note: Writing Center tutoring and resources offer holistic thesis support, not comprehensive copyediting. In the Spring, the Writing Center distributes a list of copyeditors for hire; many are former RISD grads/ Writing Center tutors who in addition to having strong proofing skills, have firsthand knowledge of writing a graduate written thesis at RISD.

# RESOURCES

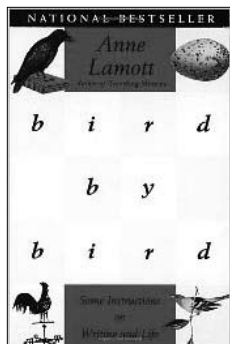
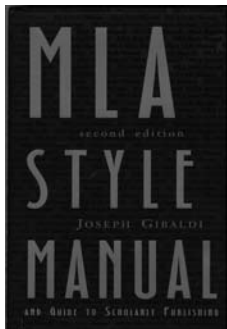
## WRITING RESOURCES

The Writing Center houses a small selection of exemplary Master's theses as well as a series of books meant to inform and inspire the thesis-writing process: books on style, mechanics and documentation; books that free the writer to write; books on writing and research in the visual arts; and books written by artists and designers. The books are for use in the Writing Center only, where we have a comfortable couch and chairs for reading. Following is a small sampling of our titles:

### MLA Style

*Manual and Guide to Scholarly*

*Publishing*, 3rd ed.  
New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2008.



Lamott, Anne. *Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

*The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th ed.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

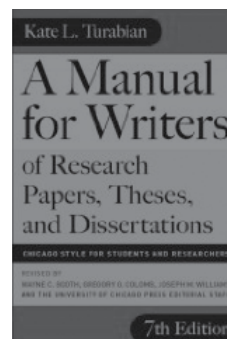


Maso, Carole. *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, and Moments of Desire*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000.

Turabian, Kate L.

*A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and, Dissertations*, 7th ed.

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Sullivan, Graeme. *Art*

*APA Style Guide to Electronic References*. PDF.

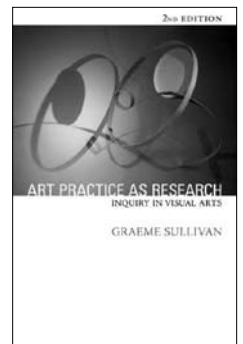
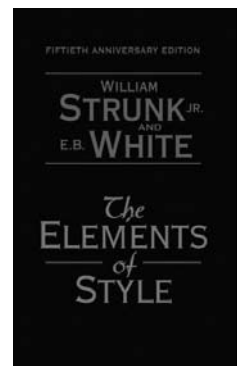
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007.



Carrier, David. *Writing About Visual Art*. New York: Allworth Press, 2003.

Strunk, William, Jr. and E.B. White.

*The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. Pearson Education Company, 1979.



*Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2010.

From journals to manifestos to criticism—artists and designers writings are both stylistically diverse and formative in not only the work of their authors but the discourse of their respective fields. Writings by (and interviews with) artists and designers influential to your work can be a significant resource in your thesis writing. Our collection of books written by artists and designers includes classics such as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* as well as the collected writings of artists including Vito Acconci, Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, Martha Rosler and Ed Ruscha, and architects and designers such as Michael Beirut, Peter Eisenman and John Maeda.

Writing and producing a book is no small task, and it's safe to say that most RISD graduate students have never done these things before. But you should never feel alone in this process. The Writing Center is here to complement the support of your thesis committee, the Office of Graduate Studies and this book. Please don't hesitate to consult with us about any aspect of your thesis-writing process; if we can't provide direct assistance, we will do our best to connect you with those who can. Finally, don't overlook the expertise of your peers; your fellow graduate students can be the most astute thesis readers of all. The Writing Center's written thesis peer review guidelines, which appear on the following page, suggest a template for productive exchange.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

### Alphabetizer

puts lists in alphabetical order  
<http://alphabetizer.flap.tv>

### Easy Bib

automatic bibliography and citation maker  
[www.easybib.com](http://www.easybib.com)

### Zotero

helps collect, manage and cite research sources  
[www.zotero.org](http://www.zotero.org)

### The St. Martin's Tutorial on Avoiding Plagiarism

a comprehensive guide to responsible citation and effective integration of sources that you don't want to miss; read this early in your research process to ensure that you are prepared to meet standards of academic honesty and scholarly rigor  
<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/plagiarismtutorial>

## **PRINTING AND BINDING RESOURCES**

Many graduate students have used online publishing to produce their theses in the past few years. Others rely on local printing companies, which can offer more choices and close consultation. Still others print and bind their own books. Here are a few reliable resources:

[www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

[www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com)

Acme Bookbinding, Charlestown, MA (800) 242-1821

Alphagraphics, Providence, RI (888) 836-4740

Hope Bindery & Box Company, Pawtucket, RI (401) 726-6688

Ocean State Bookbinding, Providence, RI (401) 528-1172

Portfoliobox, Pawtucket, RI (401) 272-9490

## **GRAD WRITTEN THESIS PEER REVIEW GUIDELINES\***

- First, make an agreement with your peer review partner about how much time you will spend with each others' writing, so that your investment will be equitable.
- Second, ask the author if there are specific elements on which you might decide to focus.
- Third, answer the following questions in a separate document. You can also make notes on the paper itself. Use specific examples to make your advice as useful as possible.

### **Content**

- 1.** In the abstract and/or introduction, underline the main points of the thesis. Summarize them in a few written sentences, reflecting back what you've read.
- 2.** Are these points clear, nuanced, and well defended throughout the text?
- 3.** Are new terms clearly defined?
- 4.** Are the author's works/projects described clearly enough so that you can picture them? Is their meaning interpreted convincingly?
- 5.** Has this work been placed in an illuminating context (cultural, theoretical, historical, art-historical or otherwise)?
- 6.** Has the author used sources effectively to support their ideas? Is documentation thorough and correctly formatted?
- 7.** Are there additional areas of inquiry or references you feel the author could fruitfully pursue? Conversely, does any of the content seem tangential or work against meaningful interpretation?
- 8.** If there are images incorporated into the draft, are they clearly situated and contributing to the meaning of the text?

### **Organization**

- 1.** Is the introduction clear and compelling? Does it convey the relevance of the author's work and ideas in an engaging way?
- 2.** How is the paper constructed/organized? Is the structure appropriate to the work? Is it logical, non-repetitive, functional? If there is no outline or table of contents, sketch one out, based on what's here.
- 3.** Are there clear transitions between chapters, and within those chapters, between paragraphs?
- 4.** Do ideas progress clearly and logically from one sentence to the next?
- 5.** How does the paper conclude? Does the conclusion leave you wanting more (in either positive or negative ways), speculating, convinced, satisfied, intrigued?

### **Style**

- 1.** Check spelling, syntax, verb tense, punctuation, etc. (Don't feel obligated to line edit the whole thesis, but if you observe writing habits that inhibit comprehension, make note.)
- 2.** Evaluate the "rhythm" of the writing. Do the sentences "flow"? Highlight examples of especially effective sentences.
- 3.** What is the general tone or voice of the paper (scholarly, accessible, personal, objective)? Who is the intended audience? Is the language appropriate to the topic and to the artist or designer's work?

Compiled by Jennifer Liese, Director, RISD Writing Center, [jliese@risd.edu](mailto:jliese@risd.edu)

The process of writing collaboratively presented challenges and rewards. We navigated a push and pull for ownership and authorship. However, throughout the process we kept in mind that merging our perspectives would yield greater results. Writing collaboratively increased our trust and confidence in our message. Because our values were aligned, compromise came pretty easily. Throughout the process, we learned each others' strengths, and eventually we grew into a space where we naturally complemented one another. By having another always present who is mutually invested in the outcome, progress was streamlined. Collaborating successfully yields a whole set of skills aside from what is learned in the traditional educational setting; we practiced patience, compromise, understanding and communication. It was a valuable enterprise.



SARAH SANDMAN + MELISSA SMALL  
*1+1=3: Building Social Capital through Communication Design*  
Graphic Design, 2009

*What was the experience of writing a thesis for you? Responses from students.*

# RESOURCES USED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS VOLUME

Bachelard, Gaston. The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, xxvi.

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Thoughts without contents  
are empty, intuitions  
without concepts are blind.

—Immanuel Kant

As quoted by Hermann Jünger

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first edition of this handbook was produced in 1996, under the supervision of Graduate Dean Christina Bertoni. It was written to address the needs of graduate students preparing their written thesis and with the greatest concern for reducing thesis anxiety. Two reprints followed. With this second edition we have taken this guide through a vigorous and enthusiastic overhaul. The amplification of this guide parallels the scope of graduate study at RISD, which has enlarged considerably since our first effort over a decade ago. We hope that the results of this effort will be discussed in the context of departmental workshops and as such will strongly support graduates in achieving their personal and academic goals.

I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of the following people: Patricia Phillips, Dean, Graduate Studies; Chris Rose, Interim Dean, Graduate Studies (2008-2009); the Graduate Program Directors; the students whose work appears in this volume and those who have generously agreed to write testimonials; Laurie Whitehill-Chong and Ellen Petraits, Fleet Library at RISD; Jennifer Liese and Frances Musco Shipps, RISD Writing Center; Amy Patenaude, Office of Graduate Studies; Mary Banas, graphic designer; Marta Labad, photographer. Special thanks to all.

Best wishes to you, the readers of this guide.

Anne West

## Colophon

Printed by Kase Printing, Inc. in Hudson, New Hampshire  
*A print partner of Brown University Graphic Services*  
Paper: Finch Fine Bright White Antique, 80lb. text and 100lb. cover  
Typeface: Galaxie Polaris by Chester Jenkins in 2008  
Design: Mary Banas  
Photography: Marta Labad unless otherwise noted

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I always kept very active notebooks. Not notebooks like sketchbooks, which I have never kept, but notebooks like a journal or a kind of travelogue, mapping a personal course through various readings, quotations, associations, observations, experiments, and ideas for pieces, all jumbled into one.  
—Bill Viola





One must have gone a long way in order to finally leave behind our need to veil, or lie or gild.  
—Hélène Cixous



I thought one must know oneself to write and that always intrigued me most of all. The idea of honesty is so challenging, much more in words than in pictures.  
—Eva Hesse

# NOTES

A series of horizontal dashed lines provided for writing notes.