M.A. DEGREE PROGRAM
GRADUATE STUDENT HANDBOOK

Welcome to Graduate Studies!

Your acceptance into the graduate program is a testament to your qualifications, and it also reflects our confidence in your ability to succeed. That said, graduate studies is no small venture. Your success in the program will require initiative, intellectual curiosity, organizational skills, determination, responsibility, and a fair bit of courage. You will undoubtedly feel the “jump” from your prior undergraduate experience to the new, much more rigorous pace of graduate studies. It may feel bit like shifting a car directly from first gear to fifth!

Although success in the program will demand much from you personally, you will benefit from your fellow students and the community that you develop with them. Along with your student community, you will also benefit from guidance provided by the program faculty and your Graduate Advisor. In short, the hard work that you put into your studies, combined with the support system that you develop during your time with us, will together shape your experience and, hopefully, enable you to achieve the goals that you establish for yourself as an advanced student of communication.

Welcome to the team!

Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines

This Handbook details policies, procedures, and guidelines for graduate and post-baccalaureate students in the Department of Communication Studies. It contains information on University policy, as well as policies and regulations that are unique to the department.

In addition to the policies contained herein, you should also consult the College of Arts and Letters Handbook and the current University Catalog for additional information on selected items.

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

Status of Enrollment

Are you a "Classified" student? Students are considered "classified graduate students" if they have successfully completed any required conditional coursework and have an official coursework program—approved by your Graduate Advisor—on file in the Associate Dean's office. Your coursework program provides you with the roadmap for your graduate career. If for some reason you desire to change this program, you need to confer with the Graduate Advisor the **semester before** you hope to make the change. If it is agreed that the change is merited, you will need to have the change notated on your program sheet by the Graduate Advisor.

Are you a "Conditional" student? Students are admitted "conditionally" for a variety of reasons, with the most likely one being a lack of preparatory course in the chosen option. If you are on a conditional program, you need to finish all courses (and the GWAR/WPE) on the conditional program with an average 3.0 GPA before starting classes on the regular program. If for some reason a course on your conditional program is not offered in a timely manner, you need to talk to your Graduate Advisor about a substitution. For more information about "conditional" student status, see the FAQ #2 at the end of this document. As you finish the conditional program, **you need to meet with the Graduate Advisor as soon as possible to plan and record your individual coursework program.**

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

1. Students whose GPA for courses in their master's program falls below 3.0 will immediately be placed on scholastic probation. This will be for a maximum of two semesters or completion of 12 units, whichever comes later. Failure to correct the deficiencies during the time allotted will result in disqualification from the program. **Once disqualified, students may not return to the program from which they were disqualified.**

2. Students whose GPA in all courses taken after becoming classified or conditionally classified falls below 3.0 may be subject to probation or disqualification, using the same guidelines as given above. The recommendation to be placed on probation in this circumstance may be initiated by the department or the Associate Dean.

3. It is most important for graduate students to understand that any WU received in a course (Unauthorized Withdrawal) is counted immediately as an F for the purposes of grade point calculation. The same is true for a grade of I (Incomplete) that is past the one-year limit. Incomplete grades become equivalent to an F after one year if they are not corrected, or if the student has not been approved for an extension through the Office of the Associate Dean of Arts & Letters. The instructor involved, the department chair and the graduate dean must approve extensions of incompletes. An Unauthorized Withdrawal or an Incomplete that is past the limit will drop three grade points per unit of enrollment.

Your Graduate Advisor will be monitoring your individual progress throughout your time with us. While we have every confidence that you will thrive in the program, we reserve the right to alter your plan of study, direct you toward a particular culminating experience option (comprehensive exams or thesis), or take other measures as appropriate if we deem such action necessary to facilitate your successful completion of the program.

Timelines and Other Considerations

(A) Advancement to Candidacy−after completing 9 semester units within your degree program, you should apply to Advance to Candidacy. The Advancement to Candidacy Review is an opportunity for the student and the faculty to determine if the program is a good match for the student's interests, abilities, goals, and performance. It is a moment, early in a student's program of study, when the student can decide whether or not they should continue in the program. It is also a moment when the faculty reach a similar determination.

To apply for Candidacy Review, you must meet the following criteria:

1. You must be Classified status (i.e., have an approved program on file in the Associate Dean’s office). Conditional students cannot apply to Advance to Candidacy;

2. You must have completed a minimum of 9 semester units from an approved program with 3.0 or higher GPA with no outstanding Incomplete courses;

3. You must attempt to advance before completing 18 semester units.

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

1. Candidacy Review will be held during the Fall and Spring semesters.

2. By Thursday of the 10th week of the semester in which you hope to advance, you must submit a request for candidacy to your Graduate Advisor via email. Your request for candidacy will be forwarded to the faculty in the Communication Studies Department for review. This request comprises an essay of no more than six pages, in which you respond to the following three prompts:

    a) How have your experiences as a graduate student in the MA program thus far shaped your skills and values as a developing expert in communication studies?

    b) On your path to becoming an expert communication scholar, describe a major area of improvement necessary for your future success. In addition, explain how you will work to make that improvement in the remainder of your graduate program.

    c) What are your initial thoughts on whether to write a thesis or take comprehensive examinations as your culminating experience? What is the rationale for your preferred choice?

3. Your Advancement essay should include a cover page, references if/where appropriate, and be formatted using Times New Roman 12-point font with 1-inch margins.

4. Your review will be conducted by the Communication Studies faculty according to the following criteria:

    a) The quality of your essay, including exposition and development of ideas, spelling, grammar, punctuation, organization, formatting, attention to style and audience, and professionalism; and

b) The faculty's judgment regarding your academic record, in-class performance, and satisfactory progress toward attaining the MA degree.

5. Your Graduate Advisor will address any concerns about your progress directly to you in a meeting scheduled for the end of the respective semester, either with the entire department faculty or with the Graduate Advisor.

6. When appropriate, faculty might suggest that you visit the writing center, take a writing class, or enroll in other courses relevant to your needs. These classes could address either developmental or professional needs.

Remember, Advancement to Candidacy is not automatic. In some cases, the faculty may decide not to advance you to candidacy. In such a case, the faculty may choose to end your tenure in the program, or may specify conditions for future advancement.

(B) As you near completion of your program: In order to graduate, you must apply one semester before your expected completion of requirements. See the Schedule of Classes for dates. **You are responsible for keeping track of all dates and meeting all deadlines that pertain to your program of study.**

Culminating Experience Options

At the end of your tenure in the program, you are required to successfully complete one of two Culminating Experience options: (1) a series of three comprehensive exams; or (2) a thesis. Guidelines and policies for each of the options are provided below.

There are good reasons for choosing either of the options. The comprehensive exams allow you to demonstrate mastery of a number of subfields of Communication Studies. This option would be beneficial in preparing for careers in teaching at the community college level, and for employment in a number of public and private sector occupations. The thesis option allows you to demonstrate a depth of knowledge and is particularly suitable for students preparing to enter a doctoral program, or for those with a specific research or writing agenda.

Your decision regarding which Culminating Experience option to pursue should not be taken lightly. You should begin to consider your choice of options early in your program of study. In weighing your decision, you should consult with faculty and the Graduate Advisor well in advance of submitting your Advancement to Candidacy request. Also, be

advised that the decision to write a thesis or take comprehensive exams is ultimately dependent upon the availability of faculty to mentor and support a thesis project.

Comprehensive Examinations

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

-The Educational Policy Committee

The comprehensive examination (offered Fall and Spring semesters) contains both a written and oral component. The written exam has three 2-hour sections, which are: (1) Social Science Theory and Research; (2) Humanities Theory and Criticism; and (3) an area of specialization. You must discuss your area of specialization with the Graduate Advisor by the 3rd week of the semester in which examinations are to be taken. The oral defense provides you with the opportunity to clarify and extend what you have written in each section. **Students who choose to drop 5960 must do so within the “No Record Drop Deadline” or it will count as a “fail.”**

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

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

Below are examples of students' scores:

	Humanities	Social Sciences	Specialization
Written	3	2	4
Oral	2	2	2
Total	5 (pass)	4 (fail)	6 (pass)

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

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

Directions for Written. The Exam, proctored by the Graduate Advisor, is offered the 11th or 12th week of the semester and is closed book, closed notes. Students will be notified of the exam dates early in the semester in which they are taking the exams. Students are provided with a copy of the question/s and their answers immediately after each examination. Faculty meet to discuss answers during the 12th or 13th week of the semester. Students will be contacted with their scores on the written components as soon as they are available. Those cases of "special circumstances" rewrite their answer/s the 12th or 13th week of the semester.

Directions for Orals. Orals will be held the 14th or 15th week of the semester; time and place determined by each 3-person faculty committee. Each oral for each section should take approximately 20-30 minutes. No notes or books are permitted. Students can have a copy of the question/s and a clean copy of their answers. Students typically begin with a 5-minute response to extend, clarify, or correct their written work. The rest of the 20-30 minutes is questioning by the committee. Comprehensive exam oral defenses are not open to the public and must be done in person, unless there are extenuating circumstances.

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

- If a student does not receive a score of 2 or higher in the written section of the exam, the student will not go on to the oral in that section.

- If a student receives a combined score of less than 5 in any section, the student has failed that section.

- If the student fails any section twice, they will not be allowed to retake the examination, and thus will not successfully complete the MA.

Notes.

1. Once a student has taken 5960 (Comprehensive Exam) units, they cannot change to the thesis track.

2. Under special circumstances, a student can request a faculty member not serve on an evaluation committee.

3. Copies of former examination questions are on file in the main office and with the Graduate Advisor.

Thesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A. Thesis Prospectus and Initial Steps:

The prospectus (10-20 pages, not including references) is a written rationale for the proposed study. Its content and form should adhere to scholarly conventions of academic writing in the humanities or social sciences, depending on the project's approach. In either case, your prospectus should include an explication of the research question(s), purpose, rationale, methodology, a literature review, and limitations of the proposed study. A separate bibliography/list of references should be attached to the prospectus.

1. You should initiate discussion about your thesis project and goals with faculty members well in advance of the term in which you plan to begin the prospectus

process. (For example, if you intend to defend your prospectus in the Fall semester, your conversations with faculty should begin over the summer prior.)

2. Choose a three-person (minimum) thesis pre-committee of faculty members who are experts in your proposed area(s) of research and who agree to work with you on developing your thesis. In consultation with the faculty, one of these members will serve as your chair and must be a tenure track or tenured faculty member. At least two members of this pre- committee must be from the Department of Communication Studies. At least one semester before you seek prospectus approval, you must submit the "Request for Pre-Committee" form.

3. Pre-committee members are available to assist you during the course of your work. Secure approval of the prospectus from your pre-committee chair and members **before circulating your prospectus to all faculty. You must complete and submit to your Graduate Advisor the Thesis Prospectus Approval Form, including all required signatures, before proceeding further.** The final draft of your prospectus must be submitted to your pre-committee at least two weeks before it is due to the faculty in the department. No later than Thursday of the 10th week of the semester you plan to defend, submit copies of your prospectus to the mailboxes of all full-time faculty in the Communication Studies Department. **Students whose projects require IRB approval are strongly encouraged to submit their work to their committees and faculty in advance of these deadlines.** Failure to do so will result in your not being able to defend until the following semester. You need to defend the prospectus at least one semester before you plan to defend the thesis. Students cannot defend a prospectus and thesis in the same semester.

4. After submission of your prospectus, you will have a prospectus defense meeting with faculty. These meetings are not open to the public. At that defense, the faculty may approve your prospectus, require further revision and resubmission of the prospectus after revision, or deny the option of continuing the prospectus/thesis project.

5. After your prospectus is approved, you must file a Request for Thesis Committee (GS-12) form with the appropriate signatures obtained. Once this has been submitted, you have an official committee. At least 2 members of this committee must be from the Department of Communication Studies.

6. Once you have successfully defended your prospectus, and in consultation with your Graduate Advisor, you may begin to enroll in 5990 (Thesis) units.

Remember that it is difficult to change tracks to the comprehensive examination once you start taking these units.

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

B. The Thesis—Procedures and Defense

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

2. Write the thesis. This usually takes a minimum of 1-2 semesters of intensive work. The committee chair, the other members of the committee, and yourself determine the working relationship between the three parties. Some committees prefer to read drafts of chapters as they are completed; others prefer to see a completed draft of the entire thesis. Make sure that all participants are clear on how your committee functions.

3. Defend the thesis. A completed draft of the thesis is due at least 3 weeks before your planned defense. The committee has 2 weeks to determine whether the draft is defensible. The oral defense must be scheduled no later than the 15th week of the semester. Once a defense date is set, the date cannot be moved, except for an emergency. If the student misses any of these deadlines, the student must wait until the next semester to defend.

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

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

5. Once you complete your thesis you will not receive a credit (CR) grade for 5990 until you receive a Completion of Thesis Project memo from the Associate Dean's Office. Until completion of the thesis, you will receive an SP (Satisfactory Progress) for all 5990s.

Note: If you have previously enrolled in all allowable thesis units (3) and do not need other credit coursework, you must register for COMS 9000 for semesters in which you plan to consult with faculty and use university facilities. You must be enrolled for the term in which you file the thesis.

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

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

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

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

1. If a student desires to change their pre-committee/committee, the student should first consult with the pre-committee/committee members.

2. If the student and pre-committee/committee are unsuccessful in negotiating a change then the student should consult the chair of the department. The chair will try to mediate between the pre-committee/committee and the student.

3. If this mediation is unsuccessful, the student should appeal to the Department Graduate Committee.

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

1. They should first consult with the other pre-committee/committee members and the student.

2. If the faculty member and the other pre-committee/committee members and student are unsuccessful in negotiating a change then the faculty member should consult the chair of the department.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the Graduate Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR)? Do I need to take a writing test in order to meet this requirement?

No. According to University policy, all students who have been formally admitted by the University to a graduate program are considered to have satisfied this requirement.

2. Why am I a “conditionally admitted" student?

Some students we invite to study in our graduate program are “conditionally admitted.” This simply means that the faculty assessing your academic records have required additional, preparatory coursework specific to your stated degree objective. This is designed to prepare you for success in graduate (5000-level) seminars. Upon completion of this prerequisite coursework, with a GPA of 3.0 or above, you will have the opportunity to become a “classified” graduate student.

3. How many independent study (COMS 5980 or COMM 4990) course units may I apply toward my MA degree?

A total of 6 units of independent study (not including thesis units) may be applied toward your MA degree requirements.

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

In some cases, an upper division course you took may count on your conditional program, if it applies well to your course of study. Also, some 4000-level courses taken after admission to the M.A. program may count as elective credit, if pre-approved by the Graduate Advisor. However, in almost all cases, undergraduate units may not substitute for 5000-level graduate seminars or coursework.

5. May I take graduate classes from other departments?

Yes, with the prior approval of the Graduate Advisor, up to 6 units can be taken from other programs at Cal State LA and can be applied toward your MA degree requirements.

6. May I receive graduate program credit for graduate courses taken at another school?

It is possible, so you should talk with your Grad Advisor as early as possible if you have specific transfer courses in mind. For master's degrees that require 30 total units, such as ours, no more than 9 semester units of acceptable transfer, extension and/or special session courses may be included on a master's degree study plan. Six semester units of 5000-level or other graduate courses taken through extension are eligible for master's degree credit.

7. What is advancement to candidacy?

Advancement to candidacy is an opportunity for faculty to review your academic progress after the completion of at least 9 graduate-level semester units. During advancement, you submit to all full-time faculty in the Communication Studies Department (by the 10th week of the semester) a 6-page essay in which you respond to 3 prompts, as outlined in the section titled "Advancement to Candidacy" above.

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

8. When should I advance to candidacy?

Sooner rather than later. You should plan to advance to candidacy after you become a classified graduate student and have completed 9 or more semester units with a 3.0 or higher GPA with no outstanding incompletes. **You must attempt to advance before completing 18 semester units.**

9. What if I receive a grade lower than a C?

A grade of C is allowed on the program; however, any grade below C, including C-, requires that the course be repeated with both grades computed in the grade point average. **Students must maintain at least a B (3.0) average to retain good standing.**

10. Should I take the thesis or the comprehensive exam option?

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

11. Can the Chair of my Thesis be from outside my department?

No, not unless there are extenuating circumstances.

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

Yes, but consult with the Department faculty members of your pre-committee or committee before making such decisions. There must be a minimum of two faculty members from the Department of Communication Studies on your pre-committee. Per #11 above, the Chair must be a faculty member from the Department of Communication Studies.

13. What if I fail one section of the Comprehensive Exams?

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

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

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

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

Coursework is typically finished over 3-4 semesters, depending on course loads. Additional semesters are sometimes devoted to thesis completion or preparation for the comprehensive exam.

16. How much time do I have to complete the MA degree program?

According to University policy, “No subject, unit, or grade credit will be granted for any course completed more than seven years before the date of completion of the master’s degree.” Your coursework expires after 7 years. Any coursework that you completed toward your MA degree plan before that time must be retaken.

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