

# THE DANCE MFA THESIS BIBLE

**INVALUABLE GUIDELINES TO SUCCESSFUL NEGOTIATION AND  
COMPLETION OF THE MFA IN DANCE**

**FROM: JENNIFER FISHER, PH.D., GRADUATE ADVISOR  
UC IRVINE DANCE DEPARTMENT  
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## INTRODUCTION (Genesis)

This is a conceptual and practical guide to help MFA students in dance successfully complete a thesis in the 2-year dance department graduate program. All of your previous experience and coursework will guide you to your thesis choice, which should be something you want to investigate and live with thoroughly in the program, especially during your second year. The topic should be something you have curiosity about and passion for, something you can see as a contribution to the dance field and the world in general. Original research emerges from dance MFA students regularly, so there is plenty of room to make your mark.

You might conceivably want your thesis to build on the expertise that will position you well in the job market, if you're looking to teach on the college and university level. Sometimes, you can think strategically in that vein; sometimes, you just have to go with the topic that speaks to you, and you'll find out what the rewards are later.

Your thesis topic will inevitably relate to dance and movement, so that there is often a choreographic component involved, most likely a concert. Sometimes the topic is pedagogical, and a new class or innovative syllabus is designed. Thesis projects also include dance for the camera. You may want to present a lecture-demonstration at the end of the process, or show your dances on the internet. All projects require research and a written component, which will vary depending on your process, working with your thesis chair and 2-person committee.

This Thesis Bible (a kind of Gospel According to the Dance Department, always being revised), along with guidance from the dance faculty and your cohort, should help you prosper as you complete the process. Remember, it's never perfect, but it's always, eventually, over. The thesis is completed, that is—the learning undoubtedly goes on. Making the best of this graduate experience along the way is the goal.

Jennifer Fisher  
Graduate Advisor  
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## What a thesis is and does

## Conceptual guide

### What a thesis is:

It's an inquiry, an investigation. It has:

- an introduction to the topic and why it matters, where you state your thesis questions.
- background to provide context (history, literature)
- an explanation of how you will go about investigating your topic (methodology)
- description of what goes on in your investigation
- conclusions (what you think you have done, what was discovered, why it matters, implications for dance studies, possible directions for the future)

### A thesis contains

- an abstract, which states in brief what your thesis is about, how you went about it, and what it concludes. You'll want to use all the words that are important in your thesis, so that if it is published electronically, other researchers can find your thesis by words that relate to their topics.
- acknowledgements to recognize those who helped you along the way through this thesis
- table of contents
- an introduction
- chapters (variable, depending on your particular structure)
- correct citation to acknowledge sources
- footnotes that elaborate on something not in the body of the text
- a works cited section, or bibliography
- possible appendices for material that aids the thesis but doesn't belong in the body of the thesis (graphs, interview questions, photos, etc.)

### What a thesis does:

**Investigates a topic** by using thesis questions, exploring a line of inquiry, something that needs to be answered for a reason.

It asks you to determine **where you are in history**, your context, and what others have said that relates to your topic. This is **the literature**. You then determine how this literature informs your investigation.

It asks you to determine **HOW you will investigate** your topic, how you will attempt to answer your thesis questions. This is your **methodology**.

It asks you to know **what constitutes knowledge**. You have to provide definitions, a background, description, analysis, conclusions.

It results in **new knowledge**. Then you will live long and prosper, of course.

## Timeline for Everything

An overview of your timeline for MFA Dance graduate work

### **FIRST YEAR**

- Fall quarter
  - Work with thesis ideas in Bib and Research
  - Find out about faculty members and areas of specialization
  - New Slate auditions and concert
  - EVALUATION: informal at end of quarter with faculty reporting
  
- Fall and winter quarter
  - Meet with faculty members to discuss ideas
  - Use this opportunity to start formulating your thesis proposal
  - Keep a record of sources and suggestions from faculty and elsewhere
  - Undergo review by faculty as to sufficient progress made toward degree.
  - EVAL AFTER WINTER: Make decision if progress is sufficient
  - Dance Visions concert
  
- Spring quarter
  - Proposal due end of first week of quarter (date set in Winter quarter)
  - Committees assigned by mid-quarter
  - Meet with thesis chair, who may tighten/revise proposal
  - Make pre-summer committee meeting last 2 wks of Spring Quarter
  - Meet with committee to make plans for summer research
  - Dance Escape Concert

### **SECOND YEAR**

- Fall quarter
  - Hand in thesis space and equipment request forms (and plans)
  - Meet regularly with thesis chair (register for thesis credits under chair)
  - Have your annotated bibliography finished.
  - Start handing in regular drafts.
  - Invite chair to rehearsals if you have any.
  
- Winter quarter
  - Continue handing in chapter drafts to thesis chair.
  - Continue working on choreography with chair, if that's part of thesis
  - Consult with committee members if you and chair decide it's useful.
  - Advance to candidacy in February

**Spring quarter**

Orals date confirmed and space reserved by date announced  
Confirm orals date and send reminders to committee as it gets closer.  
Reserve conference room for orals  
Thesis concerts and lec-dems scheduled.  
Make sure you understand thesis format and deadlines (with Amy Fujitani and the graduate advisor).  
Submit your final thesis to your two committee members when your chair approves its release to the committee. This must be at least two wks ahead of orals date.  
File thesis with library by date Amy Fujitani announces.  
Know the requirements of filing with the School or the Library  
Bring your Orals Signature pages to the oral (Diane will generate)  
Bring the appropriate thesis signature pages to the oral. If you are filing with the School, you need the cover thesis signature page (you type this up, with signature lines for each committee member). If you are filing with the library electronically, you print out electronic form they provide.

File thesis by given due date. Give one to the Department as well.

**GRADUATE!**  
**LIVE LONG AND PROSPER!**

## Thesis proposal guidelines

Your thesis proposal is due at a date set by the graduate advisor in early April of your first year. Here is what should be contained in the 2-3 page document.

**Thesis statement:** A paragraph stating what the topic of your thesis will be. It should be succinct and include a sense of how you will delimit your subject matter. You may include a hypothesis, an educated guess that addresses what you think the research will prove or disprove. This statement might evolve; it provides a good starting point.

**Research questions:** Make sure that answering these 2-5 questions will take you where you want to go. For instance, you don't want to ask "What goes on in the brain of a dancer?" It's highly unlikely you have the time or tools to find out. But you could ask, "What do dancers say about their thoughts onstage?" You might want to know, "How is hip hop dance regarded by the rest of the world?" but a more delimited question would be, "How has hip hop dance been written about in North American dance literature, popular sources, and competition guidelines?"

**Definition of terms:** Be sure to include definitions of key terms as you go along. For instance, in the question above, there is no general agreement about what "hip hop dance" is, so you would need to show that you know the range of possible definitions and that your working definition includes, for instance, "b-boy, breaking, and breakdance."

**Methods:** State your general strategies for going about your research and why they are relevant to use for your study. Say what literature you will search (books, newspapers? scholarly journals? documentaries?). Will you conduct interviews? Use a questionnaire? Observe classes or rehearsals? Will you investigate a topic in rehearsals for a new choreography? Work with digital media tools, and if so, which ones? In this section, you will state if your research requires IRB approval and where you are in that process.

**Outcome:** What will you produce? A paper that traces a history or analyzes a dance or dance phenomenon? An ethnographic study? A paper that supports a choreographic project? Will you present thesis choreography in a graduate or independent concert? Create a dance media work? Collaborate with others? Design a new way of teaching a topic? You may not know exactly all the turns the research will take at this point, but try to list the logical possibilities and where your focus is now. Remember to relate your "product" to your thesis statement and research questions above.

**Thesis committee choices:** List 3 possible configurations—1st choice, then alternatives. List more than one chair possibility (except in dance science, if you are already working with Jeff Russell). Committees will be finalized before the end of spring quarter.

**Sample sources:** Include a sample of sources to indicate what you've done so far.

## SAMPLE PROPOSAL\*

Include your name, perhaps a title, or maybe just the proposal.

This thesis will explore the relationship of the modern dancer to the mirror as a training tool. The mirror is often present in modern dance studios in Western culture, a practice inherited from the tradition of ballet, even though there is a history of modern dance exploring movement “from within,” as opposed to learning and correcting exact postures. Yet, there are also conflicting ideas and philosophies among teachers and dancers about whether the mirror helps or hinders modern dance skill acquisition. My project is to explore the following questions: what are the presumed benefits and hindrances of the mirror in modern dance training? What does the dancer perceive to actually take place when they relate to their mirror image? Are a modern dancer’s perception, moment execution, and technique influenced by mirror use? How? Do dancers consider the mirror a friend or foe? Do technique teachers think that the mirror actually helps acquisition of skills that enhance modern dance?

My methodology will include observation of and interviews with the following people: dance majors at the University of California, Irvine; two veteran modern technique professors, and a few professional dancers. I will also use “autobiography as fieldwork” by including my own experiences and attitudes related to the topic. In addition, I will survey books and articles that reveal the history of using mirrors in dance classrooms, as well as rationales for using the mirror in modern dance. These will often include articles from popular dance magazines, which tend to reveal current practices and attitudes of individual teachers. Although modern dance is the focus, much of this

material may also include information about other forms, such as ballet and jazz, when they shed light on dancer-mirror relationships.

I will develop a set of interview questions to be used on a questionnaire, then expanded upon in face-to-face interviews. The questions will be aimed at revealing attitudes and opinions of dancers and their teachers when it comes to the usefulness of the mirror. Examples of such questions include: What is your relationship to your image in the mirror in a dance class? Does it help you? In what way? Do you see the mirror as a friend or foe? Is the experience of dancing with and without a mirror different? How?

I expect that my written thesis will be about 35 pages, excluding forward and end matter. I would like to present my findings in a lecture demonstration of about an hour that could take place in a classroom or studio such as Gillespie 1100.

#### SAMPLE bibliography:

(can include 5-10 items, or however many you've explored thus far)

#### COMMITTEE requests:

(you will give 3 sample committees, first choice first. All 3 should be from the Dance Department, unless you've discussed having a specialist from elsewhere for specific expertise and have secured their agreement).

1. Professor whoever, chair  
Other member number one  
Other member number two
  
2. Professor whoever, chair  
Other member  
Other member  
  
(except in dance science, suggest at least 2 Chair choices)
  
3. Professor whoever, chair  
Other member  
Other member  
  
(make sure you have several choices for committee members, not just the same 2)

\* Material taken from and adapted liberally from the 2005 MFA thesis of Shantel Ehrenberg, who is now completing her Ph.D. at University of Manchester.

## Guidelines for advancing to candidacy, Dance MFA

### PROCEDURES TO ADVANCE (usually in February of second year)

1. Amy Fujitani will email you to let you know the deadline for advancing and asking you to make an appointment with her before then.
2. You meet with Amy Fujitani, who checks to see if you have any incompletes or low grades, and if you have completed all required courses so far.
3. You bring the grad advisor the advancement form (given by Amy F.) and leave it with her.
4. Grad advisor checks with the thesis committee chair to see if the student is on track and has completed the advancement requirements (see below).
5. If chair agrees, grad advisor signs the advancement form. The department chair also signs the form (not the thesis chair). Diane sends it downstairs to Amy F. Then the student is advanced to candidacy.

### Dance Department requirements for advancing:

It's suggested that you make a folder to give your chair, containing evidence of all these things below in it, so your chair can get the overview and be reminded of what's completed. Label the folder "requirements for advancing folder." It will contain the following:

**--one-paragraph description of the thesis.** This will be on the way to having an abstract, a clear one-paragraph version of the goals, scope and, at this point, the plan for the thesis. Their research questions and delimitations should be in this paragraph.

**--an annotated bibliography.** This is a requirement that documents the fact that the literature search has been done. You will probably have turned that in during the Fall quarter. At this point, perhaps you have already submitted to your chair a section of the thesis that covers the literature search in way that's integrated into the thesis. Your annotated bibliography will eventually turn into a bibliography or "works cited" page as you start to write your thesis. Keep this current as you hand in thesis drafts.

--**an outline of the whole thesis.** This may change a little from draft to draft, so keep it updated as the structure of the thesis evolves. In the outline, you can refer to sections that will be written later and your rehearsal process, if that is relevant.

--**a good section of the written work and/or the choreography.** It is up to your chair to let you know what “a good portion of the work that indicates the student is on track” consists of. Producing a chapter is always a good requirement. The introduction isn’t always the easiest section to come up with first—it tends to get revised a lot—so perhaps the substantial writing you’ve completed is another section. If there is choreography, your chair will likely have seen the work in rehearsal many times and know what else is planned and the progress of that work. **YOUR CHAIR MUST SEE YOUR WORK AS IT EVOLVES**, whether this means a written draft or rehearsals of your work.

## **THESIS JOURNEY AND WORKING RELATIONSHIPS**

- 1. Deciding on your thesis:** This is a process you should start as early as possible. Some of you may already have strong ideas, but keep in mind that change and discovering new things is an important aspect of your graduate process. Each of your courses will provide an opportunity for you to investigate how your interests intersect with the field of dance studies. You will also be meeting different faculty members and discovering their fields of expertise, which will help you decide on your thesis topic. This is a time to make lists and to keep a notebook of ideas and resources. Your thesis should be an exploration of something you are excited about and something that allows you to research a topic that's relevant to the field.
- 2. Thesis proposal:** You will hear more about what this 2-3 page document will contain as you go along. During the first few weeks of Spring quarter, you will submit to the graduate advisor your proposal and a few choices for your committee structure. Your proposal will start with a focused sentence or two that states your thesis project (your distilled “thesis statement”). It will include your research questions (what question or questions is your thesis going to answer?). Then you say how you will go about it (your “methodology”), and how your research relates to what has been already been done in the field (indicating how much of your “literature review” you have done already). You will state what shape your thesis will take—is it entirely a written document? Does it include choreography? Technology? If it involves a performance, what sort? How will your research, writing and performance address your research questions? Working on the proposal will help you further define your goals and delimit your topic. Remember, your thesis cannot be something like “a history of dance styles of all humans from the big bang till last night’s premiere,” but needs to be a focused project you can complete within the two years you’ll spend at UCI. It should be designed to make the most use of your research and performance skills, your original ideas, and the university’s faculty, staff, and material resources. You can include a preliminary bibliography in your thesis proposal.
- 3. Committee choice:** Along with your proposal, you will submit a request for a 3-person committee. List your first choice for chair, then two members. Provide your first choice for a committee, then a second and third choice, in case faculty load and other considerations interfere. To make these decisions, do your research. Discover the expertise a faculty member could bring to your thesis process by reading faculty biographies and asking questions. Normally there will be a total of three members of the dance faculty on your committee, but in special circumstances, you can consider a third or even a fourth, member who is a relevant specialist from another department. After consideration, your thesis committee will be finalized by the graduate advisor. If there is a change of thesis topic after the committee is finalized, you should start the process over again with the graduate advisor.

4. **Meetings to discuss your thesis with prospective committee members:** Consult with relevant faculty members about your thesis ideas by requesting a meeting, by email (you may have casual conversations but make sure you confirm by email). Bring your notes about ideas and any questions you have to these meetings; it's the time to explain your interests and find out whether someone is interested in serving on your committee. At the very least, you should have googled your topic words and phrases, so that you know something about "what's out there," and you should have some definitions to start with. Then, think about what members will work best with your project and your process. In your meetings with faculty, be clear about when you are in the exploration phase, and when you've decided you want to ask a particular faculty member to serve. They may express an interest, decline, or commit, but the committee is not considered finalized until you receive written notification from the Graduate Advisor in May.
5. **Thesis working relationships:** The thesis chair will direct the majority of the work for your thesis, and the other two committee members will serve as resources and readers for the work. Once you know who will serve on your committee (by May, first year), you should schedule an appointment with your full committee to determine a plan for the summer. It is not always easy to coordinate schedules, but this meeting should take place in the last few weeks of spring quarter, if not sooner. You will work on your own during the summer months when the faculty is unavailable (they do their own research between quarters), but your Chair may choose to have you keep in touch by email. It is up to the student to form a working relationship with the committee; communication should be paramount.

### **Thesis procedures for your second year.**

**WORKING ON YOUR THESIS:** You will be meeting regularly with your thesis chair and submitting drafts according to the timeline the two of you set up.

**DRAFTS:** Submit all drafts in hard copy, unless your chair prefers electronic submission. Consider double-sided copying and check with your chair about preference. With all drafts, include the following items, in a clearly marked folder if it's in hard copy.

**--your thesis paragraph statement.** This is similar to an abstract of the thesis, but it may change (most likely will change) before it becomes your official abstract. It should be a clear one-paragraph version of the goals, scope and, at this point, the plan for the thesis. Your research questions and delimitations should be clear in this paragraph.

**--your annotated bibliography** The annotated bibliography is required to advance to candidacy, documenting the fact that the literature search has been done. As you progress, and in accordance with what your chair decides, this will likely become an un-

annotated bibliography. You may include the annotated version to an appendix of the thesis, depending on what you and your chair decide. **Make sure your chair has an up-to-date bibliography when you hand in a thesis draft.**

--**your working outline of the whole thesis.** This may change a little from draft to draft, of course. Just keep it up to date, so you and your chair can see the structure of the thesis. In the outline, you can refer to sections that will be written later. If there is a performance, it can appear as a reminder at the end of the thesis outline. You can also include the projected or tentative time you think is logical for the orals eventually.

6. **Advancing to candidacy** The deadline for advancing to MFA candidacy will be in February of your second year. You will meet with Amy Fujitani, who checks to see if you have any incompletes or low grades, and if all required courses are completed or in the process of being completed. Then you bring your advancement form to the grad advisor, who checks with your chair to see if you are on track and have completed the advancement requirements regarding the thesis work. This means you will have submitted to your chair your latest annotated bibliography, thesis paragraph statement, outline, and a good section of the written work (a chapter, for instance). If you are rehearsing for performance, then your chair should have seen evidence of a substantial portion of your choreography as well. If your chair agrees that you are on track to advance, then the grad advisor and Dance Department chair will sign your form, and you become “advanced” to candidacy.

7. **Once your thesis is complete** Once your thesis is pronounced completed by your thesis chair, you will give a copy to your other two committee members; this final version should go out to your committee at least 2 weeks before an orals date that you will set up.

8. **Procedure for your orals:** In deciding on an orals date, offer several dates and times that are convenient for you and your chair by email. Confirm the orals date in writing after you hear from everyone about an agreeable time, then reserve the conference room (with Diane) for one and a half hours. Make sure the graduate advisor knows your orals date as well. The procedure usually takes about an hour, but you want to book the room for an hour and a half, in case extra time is necessary. Discuss with your chair how the orals will proceed. Usually, you will start by talking for about 10 or 15 minutes, perhaps distilling your major statement (this is not a repetition of all your subject matter) and saying where you see your research or process going in the future. You can use the time to show visual materials that complement your thesis. Your chair will moderate any questions from the committee, after which you will leave the room while they deliberate. The choices for your committee then are “pass,” “no pass” and “pass with revisions.” You will have left enough time between the orals and the thesis filing deadline to make any requested changes.

9. **Signature pages for your thesis:** Make sure your signature pages are in order on the day of your orals. You will need two or three forms for your committee to sign if you pass orals successfully. You will have gotten an “orals signature form” from Diane Enriquez, which will be signed to say that you completed your orals successfully. **This**

**will be signed right after your orals.** You will also type up a signature page for the front of your thesis, on which all three committee members will eventually sign above their printed names. It needs to be on cotton-bond, acid-free paper. The original goes to Amy Fujitani if you are filing your thesis with the School of the Arts. If you are filing with the library, you will print out a signature page as per their instructions and bring that as well.

Diane will file the orals signature form with Amy Fujitani in Student Affairs, so make sure it gets to her immediately after signing is complete. If you have to do revisions, your committee may not sign the title page right away. Your two members might sign off on the day of the orals if the revisions are minor. The chair will not sign the thesis signature page on the orals date, but only when you have completed the thesis revisions successfully. Once your signature pages are signed, you follow the library instructions, if you are filing your thesis with the library. If you are filing your thesis through the School of the Arts, you need to give Amy Fujitani the original thesis signature page, the thesis title page, and thesis abstract.

**You should file a bound copy of your thesis with Diane for the Dance Department as soon as it is completed.**

There is no official binding required, so make a choice about what is durable, easy to file, and easy to read. If you have a DVD relating to your thesis work, make sure your binding includes a special pocket for a DVD. Filing a copy with the library electronically is optional but encouraged if you and your chair decide that your original research would be useful for posterity (aim for this).

**When everything is signed and filed:**

GRADUATE!

And, of course, LIVE LONG AND PROSPER!

**Hooding:** You will be asked along the way who you would like to “hood” you at the graduation ceremony. This person is traditionally your chair, but it is your choice. You should check with the person you want to hood you, since there are faculty members who are sometimes now able to attend the ceremony.