Guide to Writing a Thesis in English
(M.A. and M.S. Degrees)

Contents

The Master’s Thesis Track
Eligibility
Applying to Write a Thesis
Applying for a Thesis Advisor
Registration for Thesis Course/Credits
Choice of Topics
Preparing the Thesis Proposal
Consultation With Thesis Advisor and Second Reader
Thesis Guidelines
  Length
  Structure
  Reference Style
Thesis Submission
Thesis Evaluation
Switching Out of the Thesis Track
Thesis Timeline
Application to Write a Thesis
Application for a Thesis Advisor
Sample Thesis Application
  Statement of Purpose
  Description of Project
  Writing Sample

The Master’s Thesis Track
M.A. and M.S. students who apply and are approved to write a thesis will complete 30 semester hours of coursework and register for 6 thesis credit hours. The production of the thesis typically takes from nine months to a year and consists of a proposal, which must be approved by the thesis advisor and second reader and submitted to the Graduate School, and multiple drafts of the thesis itself, which the student revises after consulting with the advisor and second reader.

Eligibility
Applicants for the thesis must be matriculated students who have completed or are currently completing fifteen credit hours with a 3.0 average. Applicants in the M.A. program must also have completed the language requirement.

Applying to Write a Thesis
Applicants should apply no later than one month before the end of the semester prior to that in which they hope to register for thesis credits. Applications must include:
1) a print-out of the transcript (unofficial transcripts are fine) showing that the applicant has completed at least 15 credit hours in the program;
2) a statement (c. 500 words) explaining why the applicant wishes to write a thesis. This statement should address the applicant’s educational and professional goals and explain why the thesis
serves those goals better than the exam; the statement should also explain why the applicant believes s/he could do the work successfully;

3) a brief description of the proposed project (no more than 1000 words);

4) a writing sample, including a list of works cited that follows MLA style, accompanied by a brief account (one paragraph is fine) of how this sample demonstrates the applicant’s abilities.

Applying for a Thesis Advisor

Once students receive approval to write a thesis, they should choose their specific topic for research in consultation with the member of the English Graduate Faculty who has agreed to serve as their thesis advisor. Students should then make a formal request for the advisor by filing a thesis advisor form with the Graduate Coordinator; forms are available in the English Department office or online. The Graduate Coordinator and the department Chair must approve this request, and the Graduate Coordinator subsequently informs students which of their proposed second readers (identified on the form) has agreed to serve on the committee. The Chairperson retains the original form and sends copies to the student, the thesis advisor, the second reader, and the Graduate Coordinator. If a thesis advisor or a second reader is unable to continue to serve, the chairperson appoints a replacement.

Registration for Thesis Course/Credits

Once students have completed the Application for a Thesis Advisor and obtained the appropriate signatures, the Graduate Coordinator requests a section of ENG 590 on Banner for them. Banner will not accept any thesis registration without this permission. Once the Graduate Coordinator has notified students that their section is in place, they may register for thesis credit on Banner. Ultimately, students must register for six credits of thesis, but these credits may be split up (3+3) between semesters or lumped together (6 in one semester).

If students “split” their thesis credits, they are given a grade for the first 3 credits once the thesis proposal is submitted and approved. If they “lump” their credits, they are given a grade only after the thesis itself has been submitted and approved. Because of the several steps required for final approval of the thesis, it is highly unusual for a candidate to complete a thesis in one semester. A student who does not complete a thesis in the semester that s/he has registered for it will receive a grade of I. This grade will turn into an F unless the advisor files an “I extension forms,” but the F will disappear from the transcript once the thesis is approved.

Choice of Topic

The thesis should be written on a topic related to the student's main area of academic interest, and s/he should have had course work specifically related to that topic.

Preparing the Thesis Proposal

Follow the practices detailed in the SCSU School of Graduate Studies’s Thesis Proposal Guidelines, available on the SCSU School of Graduate Studies’s website. If you have difficulty in applying the guidelines outlined in the Graduate Studies brochure on page five, you may wish to consult the following English Department suggestions. You and your advisor must agree that you have met the Graduate School's five requirements.

To fulfill requirements a & b:

A specific description of the topic being studied, including a statement of its relationship to existing studies of the same author, genre, style,
historical period, etc. If, for example, you propose an unprecedented critical reading of an author's works or wish to concentrate on a relatively neglected topic or work or if you decide to re-examine previously unresolved issues, you should note such a direction.

To fulfill requirements c and e:
A complete bibliography of primary readings and an annotated bibliography of secondary readings that suggests the critical orientation and general relevance of the work to the thesis topic.

To fulfill requirement d:
Describe what critical approach or approaches you will use (e.g. historical, structuralist, post-structuralist, Freudian, Marxist, feminist, reader-response, close textual analysis, etc.) including a statement describing why this approach is appropriate.

Once the student and advisor agree that a proposal is complete, students are required to submit it to their second readers, who then contact the thesis advisor (not the student) with any recommendations for revision or for future work that will be part of the thesis. Once the advisor, the second reader, and the English Department Chair agree the thesis proposal is complete and have signed the signature page, the student submits it to the School of Graduate Studies for approval.

Consultation With Thesis Advisor and Second Reader
Unless the thesis advisor suggests other arrangements, students should consult the advisor regularly, submitting material chapter by chapter for comments and suggestions. Students are strongly urged to submit a completed draft of the thesis to the second reader for comments and suggestions no later than mid-way through the semester in which they plan to submit the thesis, since second readers’ comments must be addressed before theses are finally submitted to the Department Chair.

Thesis Guidelines
Students should follow the practices described and illustrated in the SCSU School of Graduate Studies’s website. In addition to meeting the requirements of the Graduate School Thesis Guidelines, all theses written in the English department will meet the following guidelines.

Length
Completed theses should be at least 50 pages long.

Structure
The following guidelines replace Elements 9-14 of the School of Graduate Studies’ Guide to Formatting Your Thesis, which describe the structure of the body of the thesis. For acceptance by the Graduate School, English theses must include the following elements; however the sequence, extent, and labeling of these elements may vary widely.

• Introduction: A description of the thesis, including a summary of the argument, definitions of essential terms, and a discussion of the following:
• Significance: A statement of the interpretive, analytical, or critical significance of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge, including any limitations.
• Methodology: A very brief summary of the research method, design, and theoretical approach(es) that the candidate has used in the thesis, including a rationale for these
choices.

• Literature Review: A summary of current monographs and peer-reviewed research on the topic and the primary texts that are analyzed in the Discussion (see below). Depending on the amount of material covered, the literature review may be part of the introduction or a free-standing section of the thesis; it may also be integrated into the Discussion (see below).

• Discussion (NB: this section constitutes the bulk of the thesis): A presentation of the thesis argument with substantial supporting evidence.

• Conclusion: A summary of the significance of the thesis argument that provides closure without restating what has already been said and may include suggestions for future research in the area.

Reference Style
Theses prepared in the English department will follow the most recent edition of the MLA Handbook’s formatting guidelines. Element 15 in the Guide, References, should be replaced in English theses with:

List of Works Cited: A complete list of references cited in the thesis. The title, Works Cited, appears in capital letters centered two (2) inches from the top and only on the first page of the section. (Example: WORKS CITED)

Thesis Submission
The completed thesis should be given to the thesis advisor, who will pass a copy on to the second reader; prior to submission, ask your advisor and second reader whether they prefer hard or electronic copies. Whichever method you use, remember that you will need to submit a hard copy of the signature page. When the advisor and the second reader have both approved the thesis, they will indicate their approval on the signature page of the original completed thesis. Since the advisor or the second reader may require minor or major revisions before approving the thesis, the student must include adequate time for potential revisions in the thesis timeline. Neither reader will sign the signature page until final revisions and editing, if necessary, have been satisfactorily completed. The final thesis, read and approved by the entire committee (comprised of the advisor, the second reader, and the department Chair) must be submitted to the Graduate School two weeks prior to the last day of classes in the semester in which the student intends to graduate. Students are responsible for knowing all dates and deadlines; please consult the Graduate Catalog for deadlines.

Evaluation of the Thesis
Faculty readers will be guided in their evaluation of theses by the following considerations: the topic must be substantial and clearly defined, and the outline and development of material should demonstrate logical thinking. The thesis must represent careful analysis of primary materials and appropriate synthesis of secondary materials. The final manuscript must be consistent with the principles enunciated in the Graduate School’s Thesis Guidelines and the MLA Handbook.

Switching Out of the Thesis Track
Students who determine that they will be unable to complete their master’s thesis may opt instead to take the comprehensive exam. However, the decision to move from the thesis option to the comprehensive exam must be made within one semester of having completed the thesis proposal course successfully.
For example, if students complete the thesis proposal course in the fall and register for the thesis course in the spring, they must submit a ‘Change in Capstone Option’ request form to the graduate program coordinator by the end of the spring semester. If the switch is approved, students will receive a W for the thesis course. If students complete the thesis proposal course in the spring and register for the thesis course in the fall, they must submit a ‘Change in Capstone Option’ request form to their graduate program coordinator by the end of the fall semester. If the form is approved, the student will receive a W for the thesis course. NB: Retroactive withdrawals and/or exceptions to this policy will not be made once the deadline to withdraw from the thesis course passes.

A student who misses this deadline and is unwilling or unable to complete the thesis has the option of completing the degree via the alternative capstone (the comprehensive exam), but the “F” received in ENG 590 (the thesis course) will remain on the transcript.

Completion Deadline for New Capstone Option
Students must complete their new capstone no later than one year following the withdrawal from the thesis course (e.g. if the student withdraws in the spring semester, he/she will have until the end of the following spring semester to complete the new capstone experience). This deadline also includes the completion of any additional required coursework related to the new capstone experience (Note: this deadline assumes that students have time remaining on their planned program).

It is the responsibility of the student to register for the comprehensive exam on time.

Additional Information
Thesis students should be aware of the ramifications of moving from the thesis option to an alternate option. For instance, two additional courses are required for students in the M.A. or M.S. program who switch from the thesis track to the comprehensive exam track. Faculty members have the option of assigning an ‘I’ grade to a student who cannot complete his/her thesis by the end of the semester in which the student has registered for the thesis course. Furthermore, faculty members have the option of extending that ‘I’ grade in order to prevent that grade from turning into an ‘F’ (this option should be used only in extreme and uncontrollable situations such as a personal or family health crisis). The student is responsible for tracking and rectifying the ‘I’ grade. If the student does not rectify the ‘I’ grade by the 30th day of the following semester, the ‘I’ grade automatically turns into an ‘F’ grade (Note: The Registrar’s office also sends students, who have ‘I’ grades, warning letters).
Estimated Timeframe for Writing an English Graduate Thesis

To graduate in May, you should:

- Contact potential thesis advisors and begin discussing your proposed topic during the prior Spring semester. As you think about potential advisors, look at the areas of expertise and interest faculty members list on the English department website (NB: don’t be shy about approaching potential advisors—advising theses is part of our job and something most of us like to do! But don’t take it personally if someone you ask is unable to work with you; schedules and other commitments will sometimes make it impossible for a particular advisor to take on a new thesis student);
- Identify a faculty member who is willing to be your thesis advisor by the end of the Spring semester prior to the Spring you hope to complete the thesis;
- Complete an application to write a thesis no later than one month before the end of the semester prior to that in which you hope to register for thesis credits;
- Complete the “Application for a Thesis Advisor” form, available at the English Department website: (http://www.southernct.edu/english/graduateprograms/thesisoption/) or in the English Department office, by the end of the semester prior to that in which you will register for thesis credits;
- Start reading for the thesis over the summer; take copious notes; start drafting your proposal; form study groups with other thesis writers to share and discuss proposal drafts (NB: Guidelines for the thesis proposal may be found on the School of Graduate Studies website; familiarize yourself with them!);
- Register for the thesis when the Graduate Coordinator contacts you to let you know a section of 590 has been opened for you (you will only have five days to register, so act expeditiously!);
- Once a faculty member you and your advisor have suggested as the second reader has agreed to take on this role, you will learn who your second reader is; at that time, it is your responsibility to send him or her a brief email to establish contact and provide a copy of your thesis proposal;
- Submit a thesis proposal that your advisor and second reader agree is complete to the Graduate School for approval by the middle of the Fall semester;
- Submit a complete and polished draft of the thesis to your advisor in the first week of the Spring semester for comments and suggestions;
- Submit a revised draft that incorporates your advisor’s feedback and addresses any concerns to your advisor and your second reader ten weeks before the end of the Spring 2015 semester;
- Be ready to address and incorporate further feedback from both advisor and second reader;
- When your advisor and second reader agree that the thesis is done, submit the thesis to the department chair along with the carefully-formatted thesis approval page, for which you must secure signatures from your advisor, second reader, and department chair;
- Submit the thesis to the School of Graduate Studies no later than two weeks prior to the last day of classes to graduate in May (check the Graduate Catalog for the final deadline).

Questions? Please contact Nicole Fluhr at fluhrn1@southernct.edu

Application to Write a Thesis
(English MA and MS Programs)
Checklist:

1) a print-out of your transcript showing that you have completed at least 15 credit hours in your program.

2) a statement (c. 500 words) explaining why you wish to write a thesis. This statement should address your educational and professional goals and explain why the thesis serves those goals better than the exam; the statement should also explain why you believe you could do the work successfully.

3) a brief description of the proposed project (no more than 1000 words).

4) a writing sample, including a list of works cited that follows MLA style, accompanied by a brief account (one paragraph is fine) of how this sample demonstrates the writer’s abilities.

***Please submit materials electronically to fluhrn1@southernct.edu***

NB: Students may discuss possible thesis topics with potential advisors, but all elements of the application are to be written by the student. All applications are read by the English department graduate committee.

Applications are due on these dates in the semester prior to the semester you wish to register for the thesis:

Due 10/21 to register for ENG 590 in Spring 2014
Due 3/14/14 to register for ENG 590 in Fall 2014

A WORD ABOUT THE THESIS PROCESS
If your application is accepted, you will be responsible for finding an advisor willing to work with you, if you have not already done so. Together, you and your advisor arrive at 2-3 choices for a second reader for the thesis, who will become part of the thesis committee if s/he is willing to serve in that role. Once your choices of advisor and second reader have been approved by the Graduate Coordinator and the English department chair, you will register for 6 thesis credits, which may be spread out over two semesters or lumped together in one semester. The first three credits are awarded when the thesis proposal has been accepted by the advisor, second reader, department chair, and the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies; the second three thesis credits are awarded once the thesis is approved by the student’s thesis committee (advisor, second reader, and English department chair) and accepted by the School of Graduate Studies. (Thus, if you split your thesis credits you can earn the first three credits first, but if you lump your credits all six will be awarded only once the thesis is approved.)

NB: It generally takes a full calendar year to complete a thesis, so thesis writers are advised to map out their work-plans early and carefully.
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Assignment of Thesis Advisor / Registration for ENG 590

Student’s Name: ___________________________ Student’s ID: ___________________________

Student’s email address: ________________________________________________________________

of graduate credits completed*: GPA*: ______________ (please attach unofficial transcript)

*Note: to be eligible to write a thesis, students must have completed 15 credit hours in the
program with at least an average of 3.0 or better.

Degree Program (circle one): M.A. M.S. M.F.A

For M.A. candidates, has the language requirement been met? (circle one): Yes No

Semester in which you wish to register for thesis credits: Spring / Fall _______________ Year

Number of thesis credits desired for this semester: (circle one): 3 6

Semester in which you plan to complete & win approval* for thesis: Spring / Fall _______________ Year

Thesis Topic: _______________________________________________________________________________________________

Name of Requested Thesis Advisor: ___________________________________________________________

Requested Advisor’s Signature: __________________________ Date: _______________

Potential Second Reader 1*: ________________________________________________________________

Potential Second Reader 2*: ________________________________________________________________

*Note: Advisor and student consult and suggest two possible second readers for the
thesis, in order of suitability. When one of these potential readers has agreed to serve on the
committee, you will be notified.

Approved: __________________________ Game Date English Dept. Chairperson Date

Graduate Coordinator Date English Dept. Chairperson Date

Deadlines

A final draft of your thesis, approved by your committee, is due at least 2 weeks prior to the last
day of classes in the semester in which you plan to complete the thesis, in order to be eligible for
graduation.

Your thesis must have earned final approval from your advisor, your second reader, and the
chairperson of the English department and been submitted to the School of Graduate Studies by
the deadlines posted on the Graduate School’s “Thesis Information” page:

www.southernct.edu/academics/graduate/research/student-research/thesisinformation.html
Registration Process for ENG 590 (Thesis Seminar)

- Student and thesis advisor complete this form together.
- Student submits the form to the Graduate Coordinator, who will pass it on to the Dept. Chairperson. Once the Chair signs, s/he returns the form to the Coordinator, who then requests that a section of ENG 590 be opened for the student. Once a section is opened, the Coordinator will inform the student that s/he has permission to register—there is only a five-day window to do so, so please register expeditiously!
- Student registers for either three credits one semester and three the next, or six credits in one semester.
  - If the student registers for three credits, s/he will need to ask for the additional three credits the following semester. If students register for three credits, they receive a grade once their proposal has been submitted and approved by the advisor, second reader, and the graduate school.
  - If the student registers for all six credits at once, s/he receives a grade of “I” until the thesis is completed and approved by the advisor, the second reader, the chairperson of the English Department, and the Graduate School.
  - Only after the thesis is approved can students receive a final grade for the last three credits of ENG 590 (or for all six credits, if six are taken together).

Revised January 2018
Sample Thesis Application: Statement of Purpose

My purpose in writing a thesis is to explore Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster in relation to gay, bisexual and queer theory. This thesis will address the concept of separate spheres for characters of differing sexualities, focusing on Woolf’s Jacob’s Room and Forster’s Maurice as textual evidence. Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own and Forster’s A Room with a View may also be considered in that they supply further evidence of the importance rooms hold both to those within, and to those not allowed inside.

This thesis will consider the importance of the natural, free world, and the unnatural, confining world created by society. It is important to note that to an extent the “room” at Cambridge University is an awakening experience for both Jacob and Maurice in regards to their sexuality. Other rooms in the novels include their homes, Jacob’s various stops overseas, and the homes of friends Jacob and Maurice respectively visit. Because of the wide range of possibilities for interpretation, a detailed research project is required. A thesis is precisely the opportunity to tease out the nuances of these texts and to uncover their cryptic meanings.

Honing in on a specific topic will enable me to become more specialized in twentieth century British literature, particularly the works of Woolf and Forster. I hope that this specialization will help me in my aspiration to enter a PhD program in this field. Additionally, the study of my primary books will allow me to explore core concepts of queer, gay and bisexual literature across the twentieth century. Working closely with my primary novels will allow me to uncover the coded nuances of both Woolf and Forster, creating an understanding that will aid me in further research for both authors.
Finally, writing a thesis will strengthen my already existing skills of self-motivation and independent study. The thesis option demands a strong attention to detail, providing the opportunity to study at a more intense level than would a typical classroom setting.

Sample Thesis Application: Description of Project

In the proposed thesis, I plan to pair Virginia Woolf’s novel *Jacob’s Room* with E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*. In classifying the different rooms in each novel, it is clear they can be divided not only into public and private spheres, but also into natural and unnatural worlds. By this argument, the outdoors can be seen as the utmost natural “room,” and the location of many sexual encounters or awakenings. It is in nature that Maurice first receives his sexual education and realizes that he never intends to marry; likewise, Jacob’s sailing trip with his friend Timmy Durrant is heavily coded with sexual imagery.

In the case of *Maurice*, the leading homosexual characters are plagued by the unwelcoming, unnatural rooms of their home; there is danger when they reveal themselves as homosexual, whether intentionally or not. Even Alec Scudder, Maurice’s lover, threatens Maurice with blackmail when their relationship exists solely in the secrecy necessary in Clive’s home. Their relationship cannot exist in this unnatural world society has constructed; there is no place for their love, because they exist outside the room of heterosexuality. The outside world, therefore, is where Maurice finds his most natural and most intimate experiences; the boathouse with Scudder, his natural adventure with Clive that ends in Maurice being expelled, and the constant attention to rain connect Maurice to nature in a deep way, implying that Maurice’s sexuality is ingrained in him. He cannot change.

The influence of the University appears in both novels; Maurice and Clive confess their love while at University, and *Jacob’s Room* is full of cryptic sexual images surrounding his
student years. For the purpose of this thesis, the University is seen as a natural room because of the freedom allowed to the students in terms of their sexuality. Platonic relationships are not unheard of, though Clive quickly insists to Maurice that love between men must only be Platonic; nonetheless, these mental relationships are beneficial for the characters in both Jacob’s Room and Maurice. In fact, I believe that Jacob prefers male company primarily for the mental stimulation accompanying it.

Indeed, Jacob’s sexuality is more difficult to pinpoint than is Maurice’s. Jacob is highly sexual, appealing to everyone who beholds him. He has many sexual relationships with women, which are less coded than those he has with men; however these male-male relationships do exist within the novel. Time will be spent in this thesis to decode Woolf’s cryptic sexual messages, using cues from her other works as necessary for frame of reference. When these hidden signs of homosexuality are discovered, it is clear that Jacob’s homosexuality is influence by the intellectual appeal men hold for him, particularly in the room of the University. Jacob’s own room is the location of his heterosexual relationships, but it is clear in the text that these relationships are unfulfilling, supporting the argument that the home falls into the category of the unnatural room.

In addition to a close analysis of the above mentioned texts, I may also address the motif of the room in Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own and Forster’s A Room with a View, because it is so explicit in their titles. Further, I expect to explore the influence that Woolf and Forster may have had on each other’s work.

Sample Thesis Application: Writing Sample

The Queer Character of Jacob in Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room
Virginia Woolf’s novel *Jacob’s Room* follows the life of Jacob Flanders, one of many young men to be killed during World War I. The narrative style Woolf employs limits the direct contact readers have with Jacob’s thoughts and feelings; instead, a narrator follows Jacob’s life, giving details that must be decoded in order to better understand Jacob. It is through these “details, details, details – enormous, petty, vital details” (Kelsey 439) – which are rarely specific – that Woolf gives life to Jacob. The narrator states, “nobody sees any one as he is . . . They see a whole—they see all sorts of things . . . . It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done” (29). This is Woolf’s method of introducing Jacob’s character.

In reading Jacob through these details, it is clear that his sexuality, just like the details surrounding him, is a complicated situation. Jacob does not overtly prefer the company of men to women, or vice versa; instead, Jacob is a queer character. His sexual preferences deviate from social conventions as he chooses to have sex with prostitutes and experiences at least one instance of homosexual love. Jacob’s sexuality is even confusing to himself, as he constantly applies the desires felt for his male companions onto the females he is with, leading only to disappointment when those women fail him in their intellectual capacity. In looking through the details, Jacob can be seen as a man preferring intellectual stimuli, who battles with his desires for female flesh against his quest to have an intelligent conversation.

Woolf’s narrative method argues that humans are not able to be completely classified. In an instance of narrator intervention, we are told that “the observer is choked with observations. Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself; stalls, boxes, amphitheater, gallery. . . There is no need to distinguish details” (69). Yet not long after, Mrs. Durrant announces “that
Jacob Flanders was ‘distinguished-looking.’ ‘Extremely awkward,’ she said, ‘but so
distinguished-looking’” (71). Woolf’s narrator almost argues in favor of allowing the details to
blend into overarching categories. Details seem to be unimportant, almost; it is simply one’s
category that matters. If, however, Jacob is distinguished as Mrs. Durrant believes, then he seems
to exist outside the boundaries applied by the narrator; that Mrs. Durrant acknowledges Jacob by
making him distinct in her eyes causes her to break from the rules set forth of general
categorization. It also shows that Jacob cannot fit in to these rules.

To Mary Kelsey, Jacob’s Room consists of “myriad elements, all churning and turning
and frothing and surging . . . for everything is somehow inextricably mingled with everything
else” (442). These details of life are “mysterious, indefinable” (Kelsey 442). This imagery gives
Jacob and his life the ability to flow freely between scenes. A contrary point of view is used by
Kami Hancock; she breaks Jacob’s Room into snapshots, or brief instances of details that define
Jacob’s life. Hancock argues, “Each of these snapshots of objects adds tiny increments, which
create a rhythm of picture followed by picture, undermining a normative perception of time”
(10); this is why the narrator frequently draws our attention away from the action of the story and
to details, and how “a whole night goes by, and one marks it by the enumeration of noises”
(Kelsey 440). Jacob’s entire, albeit short, life is able to be shown in such a small period of time
because of these snapshots.

David Daiches believes that Jacob’s Room is Woolf’s first novel culminating the
techniques she learned through writing her short story collection Monday or Tuesday (53). The
question Woolf seemed most intent on answering, according to Daiches, was the question of
reality: what was reality in literature, and how was it portrayed? While her earlier works had “a
certain heaviness and over-intellectualization” (Daiches 42), her later novels, Jacob’s Room
included, were the result of an economical and effective technique, “a prose style that [enabled] her to utilize some of the resources of poetry in creating a view of life as the story moved” (42). This technique would create “a structure that would enable her to transcend the traditional limitations of narrative and construct a meditative web of retrospect, anticipation and analogy that would build up atmosphere and interpret life as the novel proceeded” (42). Instead of the narrator telling readers explicitly what they should be feeling, she instead allows the world around Jacob to be filled with a sort of poetry of life. “[Woolf] wanted to find a way of writing which would interpret events as it described them, show both the thing and its value, its metaphysical meaning, simultaneously” (42), Daiches writes.

Whether the story is read as a photo album or a flowing river can depend on the situation. The narrator is able to control the “flow” of the story so that we travel down the river of Jacob’s life, stopping in stationary pools when our attention should be directed elsewhere. It is the narrator, therefore, who leads readers in the direction of Jacob’s sexuality, a factor of his life which readers cannot fully pinpoint despite hints from the narrator. On the one hand, Jacob appears to be heterosexual in that he has sexual relations with multiple women. His homosexual desires and interactions are more secret, but are, with the exception of his affair with Sandra Wentworth Williams, the strongest relationships he has.

Jacob’s male-male relationships are infused with a sense of mental and emotional connection, whereas his attempts at male-female relationships – more often than not purely sexual in nature – are based upon physicality, necessity, and lack an intellectual respect. “Woolf carefully entwines the narrative strand that follows Jacob’s sexual education with the one following his intellectual education until the two finally become inseparable” (Harris 421), leading to the relationship between intellectual and physical attraction. Kelsey argues that “what
interests Mrs. Woolf within human beings is, first, their intolerable mystery and then all those parts of them that are on the borderland of various levels of consciousness between body and spirit” (436). This distinction between the body (read: physical) and spirit (read: mental, emotionally, intelligent) worlds is what causes Jacob to be so hard to place in the realm of sexuality.

In his sexual encounter with Simeon, the emphasis of the moment is on the mental, intellectual connection between the men. “It was the intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly. . . intimacy—the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. . . it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the luster of pearl” (45). The sexual imagery is clear here, but within it lies the idea of mental stimulation. The emphasis of “mind . . . upon mind” (Woolf 45) in the text brings attention to the mental capacities of the two men involved, it is not “body upon body” that is the focus – though this section is not lacking in sexual implications.

Florinda, Jacob’s most prominent female companion, constantly has her intellectual abilities belittled throughout the novel. It is of her that Jacob remarks, “beauty goes hand in hand with stupidity” (83). The narrator reminds readers frequently that beauty is not substantial: “if you talk of a beautiful woman you mean only something flying fast which for a second uses the eyes, lips, or cheeks of Fanny Elmer, for example, to glow through” (122). Fanny and Florinda are not described as having beautiful minds; their bodies appeal to Jacob, fulfill a need, and do not hold a lasting impression.

For Jacob, “the body is harnessed to a brain” (Woolf 83); therefore, the two must communicate and influence one another. This mind-body relationship implies that it is impossible for Jacob to be completely happy in a relationship unless the needs of both his body
and mind are satisfied. He cannot choose to do or like something solely on the desire of his mind, nor can he seek bodily pleasure where there is nothing to appease his brain. This is why his interactions with Simeon, particularly during their sexual encounter, are so focused on the intellectual connection between the men. Simeon, unlike Florinda, does not go “hand in hand with stupidity” (83); he is an educated man, appealing to Jacob’s brain as well as his body. In the midst of their presumable encounter, we have evidence of the communicating body and spirit communication: “[Jacob] appeared extraordinarily happy, as if his pleasure would brim and spill down the sides if Simeon spoke. Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing” (45). Physically, there is the picture of Jacob standing, of his happy appearance. Spiritually, it is clear Simeon’s words have a great pleasure-bringing effect on Jacob. The physical aspect is unable to be described; there is just words, minds imprinting, and pearly pools.

Daiches’ theory on Woolf’s narrative strategy – that she allows interpretation on the part of the reader while she allows the narrator to flow between thoughts seamlessly, allowing the reader to catch on to the implied meaning or not – is used to portray the relationship between Jacob and Bonamy to make the homosexual love less prominent. Woolf uses this method while Jacob is choosing something to read: “he sighed again, being indeed so profoundly gloomy that gloom must have been lodged in him to cloud him at any moment, which was odd in a man who enjoyed things so, was not much give to analysis, but was horribly romantic, of course, Bonamy thought, in his rooms in Lincoln’s Inn” (147). In a single sentence, we are taken through Jacob’s gloomy sigh to Bonamy’s thoughts – Bonamy, who could not know Jacob is sighing. This narrative strategy places Jacob and Bonamy together, though physically they are miles apart; this positions the two males in close mental proximity to each other, where the emotions of one run into the thoughts of another.
Surrounding this section, Woolf makes use of an envelope pattern, seen in poetry to “bookend” an important passage, to draw further attention to the mental connection between Jacob and Bonamy; “‘But the *Daily Mail* isn’t to be trusted,’ said Jacob to himself, looking about for something else to read . . . It was to Bonamy that Jacob wrote from Patras—to Bonamy who couldn’t love a woman and never read a foolish book” (147). These sentences seal the previous selection in a way that makes it clear the two males find reading extremely important. In fact, their relationship seems defined by what they read and write. Who exactly believes Bonamy had never read a foolish book is unclear, but the omnipresent feel to the text can imply that narrator has stepped in again to show us the connection between Jacob’s reading of the foolish *Daily Mail* and Bonamy’s intellectual superiority. The unobvious voice could also be Jacob’s thoughts about his friend, thus strengthening further the argument that we are being transported over time and space: Bonamy is thinking of Jacob, and Jacob is thinking of Bonamy. They are connected.

This connection through words is certainly a transcendence of “traditional limitations of narrative” (Daiches 42). It is a smooth transition, hardly to be noticed by the reader; we are swept across time and space, are shown instead of told about Bonamy’s sexuality, and given an idea of the males’ intellectual abilities in juxtaposition to each other. While their mental relationship has already been clearly assumed, this added commentary on Bonamy’s inability to love a woman creates a deeper meaning to their relationship. If he cannot love a woman, can he then love a man? The texts speaks for itself; Bonamy “was fonder of Jacob than of any one in the world” (148), and “the sharpest of knives never cut so deep” (174) as when Bonamy learns Jacob has fallen in love with a woman.

At an earlier point in the novel, Jacob and Bonamy are also connected through an emotional understanding; “there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a
second person save by Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy—the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history” (73). Anna Snaith refers to this passage to describe direct interior monologue – in her argument, the technique used for Woolf’s narrator – but argues that in this case the direct interior monologue “is used to demonstrate its own limitations” (144). Snaith argues that “inflections and mood cannot be conveyed through direct interior monologue, and so . . . the contingencies of the moment are lost” (144). While she is correct that there is no conveyance of mood in this instance, something greater is being shown to readers: Snaith omits the connection between Jacob and Bonamy, which is an important addition on the part of our narrator. The purpose of this section is not to convey an emotion, but instead to clearly show the relationship of the two men: Jacob has a part of himself only he can share, and one can speak of Bonamy in the same way. If Bonamy “could not love a woman” (147) and is the same as Jacob, then Jacob likewise cannot love a woman. That only Jacob, not the narrator, can convey something to a second person, and part of this is also part of Bonamy, then there is a secret connection between them; probably a bond which mirrors the pearly pools of intimacy experienced by Simeon and Jacob. It is not the narrator expressing limitations, but rather a showing a respectful distance between the title character – a refusal to break his trust.

Because homosexual relationship were illegal during the time of her writing, Woolf had to be sure to cover the details of Simeon and Jacob’s encounter, for fear of being indiscreet; the heavy code leaves only the reader’s imagination to bring the details forward. Yet a heterosexual relationship could not be frowned upon. Why then does Woolf abstain from being graphic in her description of Jacob and his women? “If Jacob was to carry conviction, he must be given a body as well as the mind of a young man: he is seen sailing and riding to hours – should he also be seen making love?” (97) Julia Briggs asks, arguing that “there was still a great deal of hypocrisy
as to what it was acceptable for a woman to know, even a married woman” (98). Woolf could not blatantly portray a sexual act, for she would “shock her male readers and reviewers profoundly” (Briggs 98). Woolf settles for the alternative: she does not code Jacob and Florinda’s encounter, but she does not blatantly describe it, either. Briggs argues “Mrs. Flanders’ letter is made the unwitting witness of what cannot be said in print” (99), as Woolf attests that “to suppose that wood, when it creaks, transmits anything save that rats are busy and wood dry is childish” (95), even though she allows that “behind the [bedroom] door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence” (95).

In addition to the different censorship during the acts of copulation between Jacob and Florinda, and Jacob and Simeon, both encounters end differently, showing the impact of mental stimulation upon Jacob. When Jacob and Simeon’s pearly pool of intimacy is through, Jacob is able to return home, his footsteps sounding “as if the old stone echoed with magisterial authority” (45). After “the obscene thing” (95) with Florinda, Jacob, though still “authoritative” (95), stays in his room; the two do menial things to pass the time, neither satisfied enough to leave for bed, nor too tired to read or fix appearances (96). He does not seem overly satisfied.

Florinda’s inability to satisfy Jacob in his intellectual needs is demonstrated soon after their “obscene thing” (95) through her writing. Letter writing is something that Jacob is able to do well; “Jacob had written in his day long letters about art, morality, and politics to young men at college” (97), yet Florinda is essentially incompetent. “Fancy a butterfly, gnat, or otherwinged insect, attached to a twig which, clogged with mud, it rolls across a page” (97), the narrator says. Florinda is transformed into a crushable creature, similar to the moths Jacob so often tries to catch. Her attribution to nature is not flattering; the mud of her stick pen is dirty, her technique non-existent, and it appears that her writing is thoughtless. In addition, the narrator states that
“the impediment between Florinda and her pen was something impassable” (97). If Florinda
cannot successfully handle her own pen, it is safe to assume that she is not very good with
Jacob’s “pen,” either. This example can be taken to describe Florinda’s inability to satisfy Jacob
on a mental level, but can also be a coded implication that her bedroom skills also leave much to
be desired.

    Jacob’s swapping between preferring male and female company can be attributed to his
love of Greek culture; “the whole sentiment of Athens was entirely at [Jacob’s] heart; free,
venturesome, high-spirited” (78). These joys Jacob feels bring his thoughts to Florinda: “She had
called him Jacob without asking his leave. She had sat upon his knee. Thus did all good women
in the days of the Greeks” (78). Florinda’s appearance appeals to Jacob’s physical needs, as he
finds her “wild and frail and beautiful . . . thus the women of the Greeks were, Jacob thought;
and this was life; and himself a man and Florinda chaste” (79-80). He is unable to realize,
however, that his fascination with Greek culture can only be mentally stimulating in the
companionship of another man. “‘Now let us talk . . . about something sensible’” (77) Jacob
says, as he and Timmy Durrant begin to talk about the Greeks, after an un-stimulating evening
with Florinda; clearly, Jacob is attempting to attribute Florinda to the intellectual world in which
she does not belong. He still needs to return to male companionship to fulfill the gap in his
desires.

    In addition to the intellectual appeal of the Greeks themselves, there is sexual imagery in
the mountain of Acropolis; it “surges into the air, raises itself above the town” (156). Melissa
Wisner explains that Acropolis’ description “resembles the rigidity and imposing presence of the
patriarchy suppressing women’s independence” (16). This is why Greece appeals to Jacob and
his intellectual stimulation; it is a culture of masculine intellectual rule. Further, Jacob is found
“stretched on top of the mountain, quite alone” (151), happier than he has ever been in his whole life. This unexplained happiness mirrors the happiness Jacob finds with Simeon; the happiness of mental masturbation.

Before Jacob’s relationship with Sandra Wentworth Williams begins, there are signs of homoeroticism on the part of Evan Williams, her husband. When Evan first enters the scene, we learn he finds beauty a “barrier . . . rather a boor” (150), echoing Jacob’s conviction that beauty and stupidity go together. Because these convictions of Jacob’s are the reason for his homosexual relationships – to achieve a mindful, intellectual relationship with an equal – it is clear that Evan can be read in the same light. He also repeatedly insists that “great men are needed more than ever now” (151), implying both that he believes himself to be a great man, and that he has yet to meet one. However, though Evan is clearly a man he is unable to satisfy Jacob’s need for intellectual stimuli; he was “temperamentally . . . sluggish, he had accomplished nothing” (151). Because of this, Evan attempts to satisfy himself by enabling Sandra’s affair. He does this through forced castration.

The first castration appears upon meeting Jacob, when Evan “threw away his cigar” (151). This disposal is symbolic in that it is echoed moments later by Jacob and Sandra walking and smoking together, with Evan watching. “How could he refuse that man’s cigar?” (152) the narrator asks. Here, the cigar implies that Evan is turning over his duty as Sandra’s husband to Jacob, by providing him with his own “cigar” while Jacob talks with Sandra, thus engaging in the mental stimulation he so desires. Evan has given his masculinity to Jacob, enabling Jacob to find all that he is looking for in a sexual partner.

Sandra is the first woman in Jacob’s life to pass beyond the borders of Jacob’s heart; “he was surprised by his own knowledge of the rules of behaviour; how much more can be said than
one thought; how open one can be with a woman; and how little he had known himself before” (154). Sandra has shown Jacob a glimpse of what he would consider masculine in her personality; she is unafraid to say what she thinks, is intelligent. She also appeals to him physically. The union of the body and the brain disrupts Jacob’s relationship with Bonamy, because Sandra fills Bonamy’s role as an intellectual companion, as well as satisfies Jacob’s physical needs. Indeed, she is described as being of “the English type which is so Greek” (150), further lending her to Jacob’s passions and endearment.

Soon after the connection of Jacob’s mind and body, he dies. Many critics read Jacob’s character as the everyman, or a representation of all the young men killed in the war. While this theory is supported throughout the text and Woolf’s diary, there is also the depth of character that Woolf has given Jacob that deserves consideration. His confused sexual appetite is only part of the Jacob we are shown, but it makes up a great deal of his interactions and his life. In showing the many details of life that she does, Woolf is portraying the confused in all of us, giving light to an existence that does not attempt to conform to pre-set standards by society. Instead, Woolf is acknowledging Jacob’s own unique needs and allowing him to fulfill himself without being exposed to any but the most careful readers.

Works Cited


In my work with Virginia Woolf I have proven that I am able to address her style of writing, and will be competent to write a thesis dedicated to Woolf and E.M. Forster. The attached writing sample demonstrates my ability to read closely into Woolf’s motifs and coded symbols of her writing, showing an attention to detail necessary in a thesis project. By incorporating sources on various topics regarding Woolf and Jacob’s Room, I have further shown an ability to use different forms of theory and criticism to make an argument.