

## **Contents**

Thesis project - overview  
Thesis project development schedule  
Curriculum outline

## **General program requirements**

### **First Year, spring semester**

- 1 Candidacy review
  - 1.1 Thesis project topic proposal
  - 1.2 Candidacy review presentation
  - 1.3 Approval of candidacy
  - 1.4 Summer reading, data collection

### **Second Year, fall semester**

- 2 Thesis project development

### **Second Year, spring semester**

- 3 Thesis project research, documentation and exhibition design
  - 3.1 Fourth semester thesis project review
  - 3.2 MFA Thesis project exhibit
  - 3.3 Oral review
  - 3.4 Summer semester graduation, graduation in subsequent semesters

## **Appendices**

- a.1 Thesis topic proposal outline
- a.2 Graduate advisory committee
- a.3 Thesis project documentation format
- a.4 Digital portfolio
- a.5 Additional notes on the Oral review
- a.6 Course descriptions
- a.7 General academic regulations
- a.8 The graduate studio

## **Program Requirements for the Master of Fine Arts Degree**

Design, Visual Communications

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Department of Graphic Design  
**2018-2019**

Department of Graphic Design  
School of the Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
PO Box 3085  
325 North Harrison Street  
Suite 332, Pollak Building  
Richmond, Virginia  
23284-3085  
USA

804.828.1709  
gdesMFA@vcu.edu

<http://arts.vcu.edu/graphicdesign/mfa/>

The graduate thesis project is required for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Design, Visual Communications. It is intended to demonstrate the student's knowledge and skills at an advanced level of competence. A thesis project may evolve from either a chosen interest before attending the program, or from an experience or interest inspired by coursework. If an early direction is clear, the student can make the best use of the program opportunities, selecting appropriate graduate elective coursework and faculty to work with resulting in search and research carried out with purpose.

The majority of this work is developed within the 12 total credits of GDES 699, Directed Research in Visual Communications, taken in fall and spring of the second year. Written and visual documentation of the thesis project is prepared in the three credits of GDES 698, Research Documentation and Exhibition Design during the final semester. (See appendix, a.3 Thesis project documentation format).

By the start of the second year of study, a main advisor, a secondary advisor, and an external advisor need to be identified to comprise the minimum required participants of a student's graduate advisory committee.

It is the responsibility of the student to obtain the commitment of a main advisor from department faculty designated as graduate faculty. This generally precludes adjunct and visiting faculty. By the second semester in spring, and in conjunction with GDES 612, Research Methods in Visual Communications, first year students are expected to seek advice and discuss development of a thesis project topic proposal with GDES faculty members, and to choose a main advisor in the weeks leading up to the Candidacy review presentation. The student may also suggest an external committee member outside of the department for approval by the main advisor and Graduate Program Director. Refer to Appendix a.2, Graduate advisory committee.

The work for the degree is expected to conclude by the end of the fourth semester of study. Should it be necessary to extend work beyond the 4th semester, refer to section 3.4, Summer graduation, graduation in subsequent semesters.

**Thesis project development schedule \***

	<i>Week</i>	
Semester 2, Spring	3-12	Meetings with graduate faculty to discuss development of a thesis project topic. The written thesis project topic proposal is due, and the main advisor is selected, by 1 week prior to candidacy.
	15/16	Candidacy review presentation.
Semester 3, Fall	1-4	Remainder of student's graduate advisory committee approved.
	1-15	Meetings with main advisor, secondary and external advisor(s); generally bi-weekly with main advisor.
	9-10	Third semester review.
Semester 4, Spring	1-15	Meetings with main advisor, secondary and external advisor(s); generally weekly with main advisor.
	7-10	Fourth semester review presentation (varies due to MFA exhibition).
	TBD	MFA thesis project exhibit / Oral reviews for those graduating in May.

\* *This schedule complements, but is external to the courses wherein the majority of the thesis project topic proposal and further development take place: GDES 612, Research Methods in Visual Communications (2nd semester); GDES 699, Directed Research in Visual Communications (3rd and 4th semesters); and GDES 698, Research Documentation and Exhibition (4th semester).*

## Curriculum Outline

See appendix, a.6 for Course descriptions

- 15 Fall 4 cr. GDES 610 Visual Communications Workshop  
4 cr. GDES 611 Visual Communications Workshop  
4 cr. GDES 621 Visual Communications Seminar  
3 cr. Graduate Elective

- 15 Spring 4 cr. GDES 611 Visual Communications Workshop  
4 cr. GDES 612 Research Methods in Visual Communications  
4 cr. GDES 621 Visual Communications Seminar  
3 cr. Graduate Elective

Candidacy review presentation

- 15 Fall 4 cr. GDES 611 Visual Communications Workshop  
4 cr. GDES 621 Visual Communications Seminar  
4 cr. GDES 699 Directed Research in Visual Communications  
3 cr. Graduate Elective

Third semester review

- 15 Spring 3 cr. GDES 698 Research Documentation and Exhibition Design  
8 cr. GDES 699 Directed Research in Visual Communications  
4 cr. GDES 621 Visual Communications Seminar

Fourth semester review presentation

MFA Thesis project exhibition

Oral review

- 60 total credits

### GDES Department Graduate Electives

- 3 cr. GDES 593 Internship  
3 cr. GDES 631 Teaching Practicum  
3 cr. GDES 692 Research/Individual Study

## General Program requirements

### First Year, Spring semester **1 Candidacy review**

The bulk of the Candidacy review (80%) represents visual work created in required graduate program course work as well as graduate elective courses during the first year. This focus informs the graduate faculty regarding the knowledge, skills, and insight of the student.

The remaining 20% is the Thesis project topic proposal.

Students are encouraged to begin informal development of topic areas of interest during the first semester of study. Beginning with the second week of classes in the spring semester, it is critical that this become a formalized and rigorous inquiry. In conjunction with GDES 612, Research Methods in Visual Communications, students should begin to identify topic interests and schedule meetings with ALL department faculty to discuss ideas. Integrating aspects of the topic whenever possible into other course work is strongly encouraged.

Near mid-term of the 2nd semester, students should be working on a single topic proposal and seek advice from only a few faculty for formulation of a thesis project topic proposal, as part the Candidacy review presentation. Students are required to create documentation of the proposal (refer to appendix a.1 Thesis topic proposal outline), which may include required the graduate program coursework (above), especially if it is relevant to the development or understanding of the topic.

#### **1.1 Thesis project topic proposal**

This proposal has been traditionally formulated as part of GDES 612, Research Methods in Visual Communications, and it constitutes 20% of the Candidacy review. Students are reminded that the thesis project must represent an original contribution to the information base of the discipline. Students must demonstrate the significance of their topic and, by the 4th semester, generate sub-problems, develop parameters, and determine methodology and create documentation. The final draft of the documentation is submitted before the Oral review. First year students are encouraged to see the **problem areas** and **opportunities** within a topic... permitting a head start on forming a statement or argument.

Refer to appendix a.1 Thesis topic proposal outline.

Since this is a written document, it is recommended that students seek assistance with writing a draft of the proposal from the VCU Writing Center, <http://uc.vcu.edu/learning-support/writing-center/>. While not an editing service, center staff will read student work, discuss it, point out problems and instruct the student regarding how to correct those problems. They can see students multiple times and frequently the tutors in the center see "regulars" with whom they work throughout the semester. There is currently not a fee for this.

The Graduate Program Director will send prepared copies to any participating external critic(s). Students should deliver copies to GDES faculty.

#### **1.2 Candidacy review presentation**

The candidacy review presentation is the first of four required formal reviews in the Graduate Program. Degree-seeking graduate students who have completed at least nine but fewer than sixteen graduate credits, are required by the Graduate School to be reviewed for candidacy by the graduate faculty of the Department of Graphic Design. The purpose of this review is to inform the graduate faculty regarding the knowledge, skills, and insight of the student. While the granting of candidate status is not a guarantee of graduation, it is confirmation from the faculty to the student that his/her current level of performance is a strong indicator for successful completion of degree requirements.

The review consists of approximately one hour for each student to deliver a professionally prepared visual presentation, and for discussion of the thesis project topic proposal, including an open critique involving students, faculty, and any visiting critic(s).

#### 1.4 Approval of candidacy

The graduate faculty will independently comment on and ultimately vote on each candidacy. The Graduate Program Director will be responsible for informing each candidate of the graduate faculty's review, while the main advisor will be responsible for relaying additional comments regarding the thesis project topic proposal.

The faculty may reach one of three conclusions:

1. *The student meets departmental requirements for candidacy and is recommended for continuation in the program.*
2. *The student has not shown sufficient development at this time, but the faculty believes additional study will most likely result in such development. The candidacy status is then deferred, and the student will be reviewed again the following semester. Additional provisional coursework may be assigned.*
3. *The student does not meet departmental requirements for candidacy and is not recommended for continuation in the program.*

Upon granting candidacy, faculty may also request a revised thesis project topic proposal should the initial proposal require further articulation or development. The main advisor will work with the student to revise the proposal.

Additionally, confirmation of candidate status will be deferred until all outstanding incomplete grades are resolved. Students with less than a 3.0 academic average will not be granted candidacy.

The Admission to Master's or Doctoral Degree Candidacy form must be signed by both the student and the main advisor and submitted to the Graduate Program Director

#### Second Year, Fall semester 1.5 Summer reading, data collection

Students are expected to take advantage of the summer months to further their thesis project work (e.g. do critical reading, collect information and data on their own or possibly with more coursework). Faculty advisors, however, are not required to be available for advising during the summer due to their 9-month contracts.

#### 2 Thesis project development

The fall semester of the second year is a critical stage for the thesis project development. As part of the fall 4 credits of GDES 699 Thesis Research in Visual Communications, students are required to further develop written components of their Thesis project. They must also confirm commitments from other advisor(s) to the Graduate Program Director by the fourth week of the semester. At that time the Graduate Committee will approve advisors, and process requests for external advisors to be affiliate graduate faculty as needed.

Emphasis of coursework should be on visual search and development in order to generate insight and original visual samples (versus merely collecting available samples). During this semester, second year students are encouraged to work with faculty within GDES 692, Research/Individual Study for this purpose, especially the main advisor. Note that independent studies should be arranged at the end of the previous semester if possible. GDES 699, Directed Research in Visual Communications will aid to further develop research material, as may GDES 621 Visual Communications Seminar. Students are responsible to seek regular consultation with advisors.

The third semester review is intended for the student and the full advisory committee. It is an opportunity for the student to acquaint the graduate advisory committee as a group—who ultimately make evaluative decisions regarding the success of the thesis project—with the current details of the student's work to date. The review permits discussion that might influence the final direction of study in preparation for the last semester of the program.

Students are required to enroll in GDES 698, Research Documentation and Exhibition Design and a final 8 credits in GDES 699, Directed Research in Visual Communications. Work on the thesis project, its documentation and exhibition, and the fourth semester review presentation is to be done within the context of these two courses. Graduate Seminar is also required.

GDES 698 Research Documentation and Exhibition Design focuses on the development of the required written documentation of the Thesis Project and preparation of the MFA Thesis project exhibition (see section 3.2 MFA Thesis project exhibit).

### **3.1 Fourth semester review presentation**

The third of four formal reviews, this is required of all graduate students during the last semester of study and should be completed by mid-term or immediately after spring break, but well in advance of the MFA Exhibition. Reviews will not be scheduled after this. Each second year student delivers a visual and verbal presentation on their thesis project to the student's graduate committee, other faculty and students in the Department of Graphic Design.

### **3.2 MFA Thesis project exhibit**

All students are required to participate in a public exhibition of their graduate work in their last full semester of study. The thesis project must be thoroughly represented in this presentation. Students are expected to consider content, appropriateness of the exhibition format and space, and the design of the exhibit itself. The exhibit is planned as part of GDES 698, Research Documentation and Exhibition Design, in addition to the student's graduate committee.

### **3.3 Oral review**

The Oral review is the last formal review of work toward the MFA in Design, Visual Communications. It is scheduled by the student at a time that is convenient for the student and all members of the student's committee. The purpose of this review is to summarize work in the graduate program and thesis project, as reflected in the documentation, and for the committee to sign off on the student's preparation to enter the profession as a holder of a terminal degree in the discipline. Expect questions from faculty regarding these issues.

The main advisor will recommend when the student is ready to schedule the Oral review. The advisor will do so only when he/she is confident that all problems in the study and its documentation have been resolved and after all members of the committee have read a substantive draft.

Typically, the first draft of the documentation is reviewed by the main advisor. Subsequent drafts are submitted to other advisors. The student should plan on submitting the final draft (inclusive of design) to the student's graduate committee and the Graduate Program Directors no later than 10 days prior to the date of Oral review. Each semester there is a window in which all Oral reviews must occur for graduation that semester. This date, typically in the final exam week in the spring, and prior to final exams in the fall semester, must be obtained from the Graduate Program Director.

The student under review is required to bring a copy of the final draft of the documentation to the review for reference during the examination. Students are also required to submit a digital portfolio documenting performance in the graduate program. Refer to appendix a.4 Digital portfolio.

Signatures of the thesis committee are due at the Oral review on the University's Thesis and Dissertation Approval Form. The form is then submitted by the Graduate Program Director to the VCU School of Arts Dean of Graduate Studies for final submission to the Graduate School by a designated date each semester. Final digital documentation must be uploaded to the VCU Library's Digital archives prior to that date. (<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/>)

The Department of Graphic Design requires 1 final, printed copy of the thesis documentation to be submitted by the due date set by the Graduate Program Director, typically by the end of May of the graduating year. *Failure to do this in a timely manner may result in holds placed on the graduate's access to academic transcripts and other restrictions.*

#### **3.4 Summer graduation, graduation in subsequent semesters**

Students expecting to extend their graduate documentation work through the summer session must enroll in one credit of GDES 699, and submit a new graduation application to their main advisor by the start of the session. The student must have a commitment from his/her committee to be available during the summer months and schedule the Oral Review to be completed before the close of the summer session.

Otherwise, the student will be required to enroll in one credit of GDES 699 during the fall semester to complete the thesis project and/or its documentation. The student must remain consistently enrolled in one credit of this course in every subsequent fall and spring semesters, until the Oral review is completed. Graduate students have a time limit of seven years in which to complete their degree starting from the first day of their entry into the program. Oral Reviews scheduled for a subsequent summer session require the enrollment in one credit for the summer session as well. Students who require a leave of absence from this requirement may do so only after consulting with the Graduate Program Director.

It is the student's responsibility to schedule regular contact with the main advisor during these subsequent semesters. Faculty are not obligated to undertake further advising during the summer months, and there is no guarantee that an advisor will be available in subsequent semesters. In this case, committee assignments may need to be revisited.

In subsequent summer or semester graduation, no student's graduate committee should agree to an Oral review without first reviewing and returning with comments at least one draft of the documentation.

**a.1 Thesis project topic proposal outline and documentation**

The documentation of this proposal is submitted to the Graduate Director one week before the student's Candidacy review presentation. It is expected to be similar to the actual presentation given regarding the Thesis project topic proposal. Writing should be reasonable in length (approximately 1500-2000 words, not including bibliography, captions, call outs).

1. Student's name, date, department and planned date of graduation.
3. Degree sought (MFA Design, Visual Communications).
4. Title of the thesis project proposal
5. An abstract with a maximum of 150 words.
6. A statement of intent that addresses the objectives and the basis and the directions for the work by answering the following questions:

Why is this a worthwhile design problem and what are the opportunities within it?

- for yourself?
- for the field?

Describe the current state of art regarding these problems.

- who is doing what.
- give visual examples.

Identify your strength and weaknesses regarding the above problems.

- where do you come from?  
(such as a technical, philosophical, or cultural point of view).
- what do you need to read, learn?
- what new skills do you need?
- what do you already know?
- what can you already do?

Who and where are possible resources (people, information, equipment).

- at VCU?
- beyond VCU?

What will determine the success of your study? Note that, at this point, this is only speculation.

- the validity of any statement or argument you make?
- the validity of any solution you create?

7. A bibliography.

Students are reminded that their thesis project must represent an original contribution to the information base of the discipline. Students must demonstrate the significance of their topic, and faculty must be convinced that the student will be able to generate sub-problems, develop parameters, and explore relevant methodology.

**a.2 Graduate advisory committee**

The main advisor must be a full-time GDES faculty member and regularly advises the student's thesis project development and course enrollment during the student's second year. The main advisor assigns the grade for the final 8 credits of GDES 699 in the spring plus any additional credits in later semesters, with the general consent of other advisors. The main advisor checks and submits the graduation application for the student in the spring semester of the second year.

A secondary advisor may be any GDES faculty member who have been designated as graduate or affiliate graduate faculty, and is responsible in a secondary capacity to assist and contribute in the advising and evaluation process.



An external advisor is required to be a faculty member or the equivalent (holder of a terminal degree) outside of the Department of Graphic Design who has relevant expertise in some aspect of the student's Thesis project. If the external advisor does not have graduate faculty status they must be appointed as affiliate graduate faculty and be approved by the graduate school. Permission from the Graduate Program Director is required when the external advisor is outside the University community.

The Graduate Program Directors may or may not be one of the advisors, but remain ex-officio members during the second year of study, and may opt to attend required reviews.

A selected Co-Director of the program will serve as the academic advisor for all first year students, provide scheduling and requirements for candidacy review presentations, and mediate disagreements that arise in the process of a student's performance evaluation.

### **a.3 Thesis project documentation format**

Documentation may vary in size, binding, and paper stock, but one printed copy must be submitted to the department of Graphic Design by the due date set by the Graduate Program Director, regardless of style. Presentation format must be approved by the main advisor. Final digital documentation must be uploaded to the VCU Library's Digital archives by the deadline set by the Graduate School each semester. <http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/>

Media presentations important to the printed documentation may be included, however students and their main advisor should carefully consider the temporal nature of both digital and analog media formats.

Information regarding the policies and procedures for graduate theses are online at <https://graduate.vcu.edu/student/thesis.html>. This information should be reviewed by all graduate students during their final semester.

The thesis and dissertation manual available here provides a general set of guidelines approved by the University Graduate Council. However, the student's graduate committee is the final arbiter concerning the Thesis project documentation's acceptability. The committee's responsibility includes approving style and format, and technical and professional competency.

### **a.4 Digital portfolio**

Students are required to leave digital documentation of their graduate work with the department as an historical record. This documentation should consist of 40 separate high resolution images (TIFF, JPEG). This can be submitted in physical media or with cloud-based file sharing services such as Google Drive, DropBox, etc.

Include a "slide list" text file so that each image is labeled and identified:

1. student's name
2. project description
3. the semester and year
4. faculty member's name with whom the work was done.

### **a.5 Additional notes on the Oral review**

If a committee member cannot be on campus for the oral exam, the student should make arrangements with the committee member to be present either by videoconference, teleconference, or online video link (such as Skype). In the case of videoconference or teleconference either the student or the main advisor should make arrangements with the Dean's office for use of appropriate conference room and VCUArts Technology Support to have a technician present to set up. If the committee member approves the defense the department chair will sign for them.

## **a.6 Course descriptions**

### **GDES 593 Visual Communications Internship**

Semester course; 3 or 6 credits. May be repeated to a maximum of 6 credits. Prerequisite: Permission of chair required. Supervised study in cross-disciplinary visual communications research projects to integrate theory with practice. Training is provided under the direction and supervision of qualified professional practitioners and a faculty adviser.

### **GDES 610 Visual Communications Workshop**

Semester course; 3 lecture and 3 studio hours. 4 credits. Prerequisite: permission of the Graduate Program Director. A studio course focusing on the philosophical, communicative and aesthetic relationships of visual communications problem-solving and the effective articulation of concepts.

### **GDES 611 Visual Communications Workshop**

Semester course; 3 lecture and 3 studio hours. 4 credits. May be repeated for a maximum total of 16 credits. Prerequisite: permission of the graduate director required. A studio course focusing on the philosophical, communicative and aesthetic relationships of visual communications problem solving and the effective articulation of concepts.

### **GDES 612 Research Methods in Visual Communications**

Semester course; 3 lecture and 3 studio hours. 4 credits. Prerequisite: permission of the Graduate Program Director. A studio-based examination of design research methods with emphasis placed on linking knowledge, comprehension and application of historic and emerging methods of experimentation to generative and iterative studies. The course culminates in the writing and presentation of a research proposal for the second year of study.

### **GDES 621 Visual Communications Seminar**

Semester course; 4 lecture hours. 4 credits. May be repeated. A detailed examination of selected theoretical, historical, aesthetic, and social areas of concern to the designer. Scholarly research, critical analysis, and discussion are expected.

### **GDES 631 Visual Communications Teaching Practicum**

Semester course; 1 lecture and 6 practicum hours. 3 credits. Permission of chairman required. Observation, instruction, and practice to develop skills in the design, organization, and conduct of courses in visual communication. Explores multiple teaching strategies, student development, learning styles, and evaluation techniques.

### **GDES 692 Visual Communications Research/Individual Study**

Semester course; 6 studio hours, 3 credits. May be repeated. Permission of chairman required. The structuring, research, execution, and presentation of an independent project in visual communication under the guidance of a faculty advisor.

### **GDES 698 Research Documentation & Exhibition Design**

Semester course; 2 lecture and 3 studio hours. 3 credits. Prerequisite: permission of the Graduate Program Director. A studio-based course focusing on the design and production of final research documentation in both book and exhibition formats.

### **GDES 699 Directed Research in Visual Communications**

Semester course; variable hours (three studio hours per credit). 1, 4 or 8 credits. May be repeated for a maximum of 16 credits. Prerequisites: successful completion of 30 credit hours of graduate study and permission of department chair. Supervised investigation and presentation of selected problems in visual communications. Executed under the supervision of a graduate adviser and review committee.

## **a.7 General academic regulations**

All students should familiarize themselves with the current Graduate School bulletin:

<http://bulletin.vcu.edu/graduate/>

including the general academic regulations regarding satisfactory academic progress.

Graduate students may not receive less than a C in any required coursework; and no more than 20%, 12 credits, may be less than a B.

#### **a.8 The graduate studio**

The graduate studio is the hub of nearly all activity in the program. It is a critical link in fostering the community among the learners and teachers. Every two-year student is required to occupy a desk area in the graduate studio, and provisional graduate students may be permitted a desk space during the provisional year if space permits.

It is important that all students assume responsibility to utilize the studio in a respectful manner for others and future students. Please follow these simple rules.

**1. Do not use the main conference table as a work or storage space.**

2. Do not cut or mark directly on your desk. Tape, adhesives and/or attachments to the desk should easily and cleanly remove when you move out.
3. All items you bring into the studio must leave with you at the end of your program of study. If you leave any materials for fellow students, you must obtain their agreement first, and leave materials in their own desk spaces, not in the common areas.
4. Keep the graduate studio clean. Recycle the paper trimmings and other debris from the work table immediately after you are done.
5. The A/C HEATING unit cannot be used as a storage shelf.
6. Keep the printer paper table straightened after each use.
7. Keep the kitchenette area cleaned of your food-stuff on a regular basis.
8. No sprays (paint or adhesives) in the building.

