

UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS

FINAL PROJECT GUIDELINES AND THE GRADUATION PROCESS

Introduction

This memo is designed to help UWW students prepare and complete their final projects [FP]. Much of what follows provides general advice, addressing the kinds of questions one would expect students approaching their final projects to anticipate, or final project assessors to ask. Most sections will be useful for all students; however, three sections are only for students writing research papers. Whether writing research papers, presenting creative productions, or choosing one of the many other options for UWW final projects, students should work closely with their advisors throughout the entire process from planning to completion.

FINAL PROJECT GUIDELINES

What is the UWW Final Project?

The FP can take many forms. Students choose projects appropriate to their disciplines. For example, a musician might present a concert, an artist might prepare a show representative of his or her work. Students focussing in Dramatic Arts have directed, designed, or acted in a production. Creative writers might submit a substantial piece of work: a play, several chapters from a novel, or a collection of poems or short stories. Social work students may choose to do a rigorous practicum along guidelines approved by Skidmore's Department of Social Work. The FP can also involve research and analytical writing, usually resulting in a paper 40-50 pages long.

The UWW Final Project is required of all UWW students as they near completion of the UWW program. Through the FP, the student demonstrates competence in his or her area of focus by conceiving and completing a substantial project at the senior undergraduate level. The equivalent of six credits, the FP is expected to involve the amount of work required for two courses or independent studies. While many UWW students complete a project that would clearly be considered honors level work, the criterion for a satisfactory FP is not that it is honors level, but rather that it demonstrates the skills expected of a graduating Skidmore senior in the student's field. Assessors are therefore asked to determine whether the project is "acceptable for a student completing a bachelor's degree."

What's a good topic for a written project?

Students have addressed a range of topics, as a selection from recent years shows:

[In the Shadow of the Mountain: A History of the Schoharie Creek](#)

[Oral Histories of Three Ballet Dancers](#)

[U.S. Immigration Policy, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust](#)

[Toward a Definition of Shame: An Experiential Review of the Literature](#)

[Overseas Perspectives: The Present Political Scene in Italy](#)

The Impact of the Internet on Development Research

The Rise of Professions: A Managerial Dilemma

A written project may be a standard research paper. Or it may evolve from a student's particular experience and have practical application. In that case, it must reflect an understanding of how the project fits into the context of the student's academic education and relevant scholarship. This understanding may be shown in a number of ways, depending on the nature of the project and the student's specific discipline, for example:

by couching the project at a level appropriate to a professional audience

-- a reference for secondary school coaches and educators that discusses risks to girls from excessive physical activity, uses the technical terms of the field and includes data from relevant studies

by discussing the motivation for the project and the process of creating it

-- a curriculum on fantasy and drama for gifted secondary school students, accompanied by a discussion of goals, pedagogical issues and interviews with secondary students

by including a research component to the project

-- a conference plan on grief for home health aides, preceded by a research paper on the experience of grief and different therapeutic approaches

by using scholarly methodology as a basis for analysis

-- an account of changes in Bell Labs' approach to public interest research, analyzed through the framework of relevant public policy theories

How does my plan for a final project become approved?

You will submit a written Degree Plan [DP], any narratives and a Final Project Proposal [FPP] to the UWW Committee. These materials should be discussed carefully with both your advisors. Your faculty advisor will write supporting comments for your DP and FPP. Once your advisors have determined that your DP, narratives and FPP are in final form, they must be given to the UWW office, generally at least 3 weeks before your meeting, to allow time for office review, any changes resulting from that review, and distribution to the Committee members. The Committee members will read your materials and discuss them with you at your Degree Plan meeting. At the end of the meeting, you will know whether the Committee has approved your DP and FPP.

The FPP can be brief and usually consists of two to three paragraphs. You should work closely with your academic and faculty advisors to produce an acceptable FPP. Because the purpose of the meeting with the Committee is, at least in part, to help you refine your proposal, the Committee may ask you questions and make suggestions about your FPP, and you may come to the meeting with questions of your own. The committee will not necessarily tell you what the answers should be, but will rather try to guide your thinking as you attempt to explore the questions yourself. Any formal recommendations made by the Committee will be added to the office copy of your FPP.

Generally, the Committee considers and may ask questions about the following:

Whether your FP has **SUBSTANCE**. Have you picked something worth doing? In other words, what excites you about your final project? You are going to put a great deal of effort into it. What makes it worth the effort (besides fulfilling a requirement of the degree)? You may want to discuss ways in which the project is significant in a very personal way as well as in a larger academic and social context. What do you hope to learn or reflect upon in your FP? What do you hope your readers or audience will learn or experience?

If your FP is a research paper, whether it is **ANALYTICAL** rather than merely **DESCRIPTIVE**. Do you have a **THESIS** -- a question you are attempting to answer through your research and analysis?

Whether your FP is **DO-ABLE**. Is it too broad or too general? Do you have access to necessary source materials, interviewees, etc.?

Whether you are **PREPARED** to do the project (what relevant courses or experiences you have had). For example, if your project includes a survey or oral interviews, do you have the necessary skills to do them properly? If you want to compare teen films from the 60s and 70s, do you have sufficient background in film history and criticism? If you want to examine public policy regarding the treatment of AIDS, do you have enough background in public policy theory? If you want to do a creative writing project, have you had experience in creative writing?

Whether your FP **MAKES SENSE** in light of your program as a whole, your future plans, etc.

Note that the Assessors of your FP will receive a copy of your DP and FPP (along with any formal recommendations from the Committee).

- As you write your **proposal**, consider whether it gives an accurate picture of what you intend to do in your **project**.
- As you write your **project**, be sure it is consistent with your **proposal** – that is, that you are doing what you said you would do in your **proposal**.
- Think about what the **assessors** will be looking for. Put yourself in the position of someone who must judge the quality of your project.

It is expected that your FP will grow and change to some extent as you work on it. However, a FP that's substantially different from your original FPP will require a revised FPP and approval by the Committee (you don't have to be present at the meeting). Consult with your advisors if you have any questions.

What does a Final Project paper look like?

A glance at the FPs on display in UWW's reception area reveals that UWW has no hard and fast rules for the format of the FP. The few requirements and recommendations are as follows:

1. You should include a bibliography and use references correctly within the text. Choose a documentation format appropriate to your field (e.g, the MLA or APA format).

2. FPs should have a title page that gives your name, the title of the project, the date (e.g., Spring 1999), and the information that this is a final project for Skidmore University Without Walls, Saratoga Springs, New York 12866.
3. It is generally useful to include a table of contents and section headings.
4. You may, if appropriate and helpful, have maps, illustrations, etc.
5. Projects must be double-spaced and pages must be numbered.

How can I prepare myself to write a final project paper?

Students come to the FP with varying degrees of preparation for writing a substantial paper. Even those who have written extensively sometimes find that papers for courses have not adequately prepared them to conceive, plan, research, organize and write and rewrite a project of this nature.

Obviously, the more training you have had, the better it will be. If you feel that writing is not your strong point, it would be a good idea to take an expository writing class early in your program. Next, you might choose courses or independent studies that train you in use of the research tools and methods of your field, that give you background in the area you would like to explore in your FP, that involve writing assignments and good feedback from your instructor.

However, whether or not writing comes easily to you, don't despair. There are people at UWW to help you. Your academic and faculty advisors, UWW's final project advisor, who works closely with students on the organizing and writing of their FPs, Skidmore's Writing Center, and Skidmore's helpful library staff will be happy to work with you, in person or by phone, mail or e-mail. Skidmore Writing Center's useful [Skidmore Guide to Writing](#), available from the Skidmore Bookstore, addresses writing issues, how to research and organize your notes, how and when to cite, and how to self-edit.

How should I proceed to work on the Final Project?

Think of the FP as a progressive learning experience that is mentored by your advisors through successive steps. **The worst thing you can do is to work in isolation and then present your advisors with a completed project.**

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the FP experience, which is seen as the equivalent of two courses or independent studies, is a true learning experience and not simply a wrapping up of your program. Through the FP, you will further develop your knowledge and skills in your field.

Final project papers ~~

Work closely with your advisors. Begin by discussing your FP concept with them and making sure your proposed bibliography is comprehensive and up-to-date and includes the appropriate scholarly sources. Then talk over your plan of organization for the paper. Finally, decide with your advisors whether to show them separate sections of the paper in progress or give them a completed first draft.

Whether you give your advisors one section at a time or the entire first draft, that first draft should be as good as you can make it. You should have edited it for typos, spelling, grammar, etc. Expect, however, that the paper will go through at least a second draft, and possibly more, as your advisors hone your organization and the articulation of your ideas and edit your writing.

Other kinds of projects ~~

If you are working in the creative arts or have chosen the Social Work Practicum, it is essential that you work closely with your advisors. Talk to your faculty advisors to find out what the Department guidelines are for these kinds of projects. The Social Work Practicum requires you to give your faculty advisor specific written assignments throughout the course of the practicum. Musicians, artists and those in the dramatic arts have important decisions to make with their advisors, including what works to choose, how and where to present them, and whether to offer an accompanying written piece (welcome, but not required).

It is generally expected that an art show or concert will show substantial new work or a range of your work. The relationship and order of works must be considered, as well as whether to present works in more than one medium (or instrument). Similarly, creative writers need to decide which and how many chapters, poems, or short stories to select and the relationship of these works to one another. Plans must be made well in advance; choosing and renting a space for your project and arranging publicity are part of the project and the learning. Artists will want to decide whether to include a written artists' statement, musicians and those working on a dramatic production whether to offer program notes or some other kind of written presentation – or whether there should be a discussion after the performance. All these issues, and others, should be discussed carefully with your advisors.

How is the FP assessed?

Your project will receive three written assessments that will become part of your UWW transcript. UWW must select one of the assessors from the Skidmore community and you may propose the other two, subject to your advisors' approval. Assessors must usually have either a Master's degree in an appropriate field or considerable relevant experience. UWW will need a resume or some other record documenting the assessor's qualifications (e.g., a faculty listing from a college catalogue or a law office letterhead).

If your project consists of a paper or other written materials, then, once both your advisors have approved it, you need to send four copies to the UWW office. UWW will keep one copy as a permanent record and send the others to the three assessors. If your project is a concert, art show or dramatic production, you need to arrange for your assessors to be present at the project, or for tapes, slides, videos or other satisfactory substitutes to be sent to them. These options should be discussed beforehand with your advisors.

In addition to receiving or being present at your FP, assessors are also given a copy of your approved Degree Plan and your FP proposal, a form on which to write the assessment and a cover letter explaining the process. Assessors are asked to write a critique of the FP that notes both its strengths and weaknesses and to conclude by answering the question, "Is this project acceptable for a student completing a bachelor's degree?" They are given three weeks to complete the assessments.

Usually, all three assessments come back positive because each student works closely with both advisors to produce an acceptable FP. However, occasionally an assessment is negative (i.e., the assessor does not find the project acceptable for a student completing a bachelor's degree). Alternatively, the assessor may find the project acceptable but include significant negative comments that you may not wish to have as part of your permanent transcript.

1. If two or more assessments are negative, the project must be redone to answer the assessors' concerns and then resubmitted.
2. If only one assessment is negative, the Director of UWW has the discretion to decide whether the project must be redone and resubmitted.

3. If all three assessments are positive but contain significant negative comments, it is within the Director's discretion to give you the opportunity to re-do and resubmit the project.

THE GRADUATION PROCESS

When am I done (and when does my billing stop)?

Completion of work towards your degree means that 1) you have received three positive assessments of your FP (or see #2 in preceding section); 2) you have completed all courses and independent studies; 3) the UWW office has received all documentation of prior and UWW learning experiences, including student evaluations, instructor evaluations or transcripts, and narratives; and 4) the UWW office has received any other necessary paperwork.

Your formal completion of the program really goes through three stages to the final step of graduation and conferral of your diploma.

1. Your billing stops. If the first assessment of your FP is positive AND all your other work is complete and all your documentation is in, you are considered to have in effect completed the program, and billing stops. (Billing will start again if, after the remaining assessments, the project needs to be redone.)

2. You have completed your degree requirements. When you have received three positive assessments for your FP and all your other work is complete and all your documentation is in, you will receive an official letter from the UWW Director stating that your degree requirements have been completed. This letter entitles you to all the rights and privileges of a Skidmore College graduate. The UWW office will also send you a final official transcript (provided that you have no further financial obligations to the College). The Director's letter and the official transcript are usually sufficient for graduate schools and employers requiring proof that you have earned your baccalaureate degree, even though you may not yet have received your diploma.

3. Your degree is conferred (you officially become a Skidmore B.A. or B.S.) and you receive your diploma (the piece of paper certifying your new status). Skidmore College degrees are conferred in November, in March and at graduation in May. In order for you to receive a degree after you have completed all your degree requirements, your name must have been read to the Skidmore faculty at one of the faculty meetings in early October, February or early May. UWW students, whose programs move at an individualized pace, must plan carefully in order to be eligible for graduation at one of the degree conferral dates, especially that of Commencement. UWW sends information to students each year giving the exact date by which work must be completed in order for names to be read to the faculty in May, the prerequisite for conferral of the degree at Commencement.

I need to graduate by a certain date. How should I plan towards this goal?

To many UWW students, making a particular date becomes very important, either because they want to march at graduation, or because of graduate school or work-related deadlines. If you wish to qualify for a certain degree conferral date, especially the May date, it is crucial to begin planning and working on your FP well ahead of time. The months before the May graduation are very busy at UWW and in the residential college. Let your advisors and the UWW office know what your needs are. Early

planning and steady follow-up – ideally beginning in September or October for a May graduation – are essential. If you wish to receive your degree at Commencement, the cutoff date for the final draft of a paper can be as early as the end of March, and that for other projects not much later, in order to allow time for a number of things to happen:

1. You must allow time for your advisors to comment on your drafts, if you are writing a paper. It might seem reasonable to a student to submit a draft three weeks before UWW's graduation deadline and expect that ample turnaround time has been given. However, remember that your Skidmore faculty advisor probably has a full load of teaching and committee work and twenty to thirty residential advisees as well as a number of UWW advisees, may be supervising multiple UWW FPs and residential honors papers, and is being approached at a particularly busy time of the academic year. Advisors who have already seen and had time to comment on one or more drafts and have received responsive rewrites will have less difficulty turning around a final draft before the graduation deadline.

2. The UWW staff must check each student's transcript thoroughly to be sure that all evaluation forms, official transcripts from other institutions and narratives are present and that all credits allocated add up to 120 and comply with the student's accepted degree plan. With many students presenting credits from both American and non-American college and universities, as well as non-academic institutions, this can be a formidable task. If UWW office personnel are aware of your plans and have had time to discuss missing evaluation forms and transcripts as well as any other issues earlier in the academic year, they will be able to respond to you more quickly in April and May, and there will be less likelihood of unexpected problems.

3. You must allow time for assessor response. Once your paper has been approved by both your advisors and you have sent 4 final copies to the UWW office, the office must mail your FP, together with cover letter and assessment form, to the assessors, who have three weeks to respond to the UWW office. Assessors of non-written projects are also given three weeks to respond.

To sum up, if you are planning to graduate by a certain date, then **in order to avoid stress and disappointment**, you should begin to work toward that goal a good eight or nine months in advance and keep in regular contact with the UWW office and your advisors.

Remember, however, that **the quality of final projects is more important than graduation deadlines.** For example, suppose you really need another rewrite, or more time to prepare an art show or to find a satisfactory space, but the extra time will mean you cannot receive a May diploma. That May diploma will matter less in the future than a final project that you can grow from and use as an example of your best work and that will result in enthusiastic assessments in your permanent transcript.

Help! I'm feeling overwhelmed! Any words of encouragement?

With an understanding of what the FP involves, and by working closely with your advisors and staff at UWW, you can find the FP an enriching experience that is a fitting culmination to your UWW career. Yes, there will be frustrating and uncertain moments. But these moments are part of the creative and scholarly processes. Students have found that the completed FP is a product they can be proud of and can present to graduate schools and employers as examples of their finest work. But perhaps equally gratifying is the recognition that comes when others are excited by and learn from your work -- a thrill many of our students have discovered as they draw from their educational experiences and stretch themselves to produce this last project of the UWW program.

