



MFA
in
Science & Natural History
Filmmaking
Handbook

Fall 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Welcome
- 1.2. Science and Natural History Filmmaking Program Overview
- 1.3. Familiarity with Graduate School policies
- 1.4. Program organization

2. Degree Requirements

- 2.1. MFA in Science and Natural History Filmmaking program
 - 2.1.1 Credit requirements
 - 2.1.2 Master in Fine Arts Curriculum Requirements
 - 2.1.3 Required Courses
 - 2.1.4 Elective courses
 - 2.1.5 Course descriptions and prerequisites
 - 2.1.6 Program of Study
 - 2.1.7 MFA Degree Comprehensive Exam and Other Assessments
 - 2.1.8 Timeline to MFA degree
 - 2.1.9 Master of Fine Arts Degree Completion Deadline
 - 2.1.10 Links to Additional Resources for SNHF MFA degree
- 2.2.0 MFA timeline descriptions by year of program
 - 2.2.1 First year
 - 2.2.2 Second year
 - 2.2.3 Thesis year

3 Progress toward a Degree

- 3.1 Academic Expectations
 - 3.1.1 University Academic Standing
 - 3.1.1.1 Good standing
 - 3.1.1.2 College probation/ University probation
 - 3.1.1.3 Suspension and dismissal
 - 3.1.1.4 University withdrawals
 - 3.1.1.5 Re-admission to graduate degree standing
 - 3.1.1.6 Academic program implications given University academic standing
 - 3.1.1.8 Departmental guidelines for tracking unsatisfactory academic progress
- 3.2 Annual Review of Academic Progress
- 3.3 Professional Conduct Expectations and Assessment Criteria
 - 3.3.1 Professional and ethical behavior
 - 3.3.2 Academic dishonesty
- 3.4 Disciplinary action & dismissal policy
- 3.5 Student academic grievance and appeal process

4 Advising and Committee Formation

- 4.1 Formation of a Graduate Committee
- 4.2 Selection and Role of an Advisor
- 4.3 Developing a Program of Study with Chair and Committee

5 Comprehensive Exam

- 5.1 Purpose of Comprehensive Exam
- 5.2 Structure / format of Written Exam
- 5.3 Policy regarding grading and informing students of exam results
- 5.4 Path Forward Based on Exam Results

6 Thesis and Dissertation Defense

- 6.1 Structure of the Defense
- 6.2 Scheduling of the Defense

7 Post defense and Final steps to graduate

8 Other Departmental and University Policies of note

9.0 Funding & Financial Information

- 9.1 Eligibility for Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTAs) and Graduate Research Assistantships (GRAs)
- 9.2 GTA Responsibilities and Union Bargaining Agreement
- 9.3 GTA Tuition Waiver Policy and Waiver Limits
- 9.4 GTA and/or GRA Evaluation

10.0 Other links and info

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Welcome

Welcome to the Master of Fine Arts program in Science and Natural History Filmmaking (SNHF.) Our graduate program is a part of the School of Film and Photography (SFP) within Montana State University's College of Art and Architecture (CAA.) SNHF is grounded in mastering documentary production skills that are rooted in a historical and theoretical framework designed to broaden perspectives about what it means to make films about science and the natural world.

1.2 Program Overview

The MFA degree is designed to prepare students for professional careers in nonfiction production, as film producers, storytellers and film artists. Graduates are qualified to teach at the university level. The ethos of the SNHF program has, for over twenty-five years, been to guide students with a background and interest in science and natural history topics to a mastery of documentary production skills. The curriculum exposes students to historical and contemporary documentary films, especially but not limited to works that reflect on, critique, engage and/ or rethink science research methods and findings, natural history topics, and ideas that encompass a broad sense of the environment. The philosophical approach is one grounded in the belief that every art form, including documentary, evolves to incorporate or challenge new narratives and thereby create new ways of knowing and forms of knowledge. The SNHF program goal is to promote innovative approaches to films about science and the natural world.

Coursework and thesis projects provide multiple opportunities for graduate students to work across film forms including documentary portraits, science documentary, essay filmmaking, archival approaches and experimental practices based in 16mm emulsion-based film, as they work through concepts that are rooted in environmental humanities and develop research as a filmmaking practice.

The program prepares students for careers in film and media production, especially as it relates to ideation, story development, research, producing, and delivering work. Students from our program have gone on to careers that include producing films that win national Emmy awards, appear on national broadcast outlets, secure staff positions at institutions such as the Smithsonian Zoo, NASA, American Chemical Society, PBS, and the National Park Service. Students have been awarded artist residencies in Montana, in national parks, and screen work at film festivals including Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, Mountain Film, Mimesis, Jackson Wild, and DC/DOX.

1.3 Familiarity with Graduate School Policies

This handbook provides basic information about the MFA in Science and Natural History Filmmaking along with program requirements, expectations, and procedures. Students should familiarize themselves with the information here and keep this handbook for future

reference. Keep in mind, however, that questions or concerns may arise that are not covered within this handbook; students should always speak with the director of the program if they have questions about specific policies and procedures.

The Graduate School sets a number of overarching rules, policies, and deadlines for graduate study at MSU. Departments and programs work in conjunction with the Graduate School to provide appropriate rules, policies, and deadlines for all graduate degree programs. It is the responsibility of the graduate student to maintain compliance with all rules and policies as set forth by the Graduate School and the SNHF program. For the latest deadlines, forms, and policy updates, please refer to the Graduate School's website: www.montana.edu/gradschool/.

Throughout this handbook you will find helpful links to information from the Graduate School as part of the applicable section. Again, it is the responsibility of the graduate student to stay informed about the Graduate School's policies and deadlines as well as updates to this handbook.

1.4 Program Organization

The SFP is fortunate to have an experienced and skilled administrative staff and faculty who work together to keep all the department programs running smoothly.

You will find that the administrators, faculty, and staff are open to discussion about virtually any subject and are willing to work with you to resolve problems you may face. If you have a question or problem related to a specific class, please discuss the matter first with the instructor. If the matter is not resolved, discuss the issue with the SNHF Program Director. Finally, if these avenues are exhausted, make an appointment with the SFP Director.

Each year the SNHF students elect a grad student rep, and this person is meant to represent all SNHFers, across all cohorts as ideas, input, or issues of concern arise. The grad rep is able to bring a wide range of topics to the program director who can further communicate with faculty, staff and administration.

As of this writing, the following people are the key faculty and staff that you may regularly interact with:

Colette Campbell is the SFP Program Coordinator, which includes the SNHF. She manages the administrative part of the SNHF program in direct consultation with the SNHF program director. She will coordinate your SFP course registration, course requirement questions, graduate teaching assistantship assignments, and thesis-related paperwork, including your application for graduation.

Shelley Fleming is the Business Operations Manager and Assistant to the SFP Director. She coordinates the stipends, GAP pay, and credit waivers of graduate teaching assistantships (GTAs), scholarships, grants, and financial questions.

Professor Cindy Stillwell is the SNHF program Director and professor of film in SFP. She manages the overall workings of the SNHF program, overseeing curriculum development with SFP faculty, SNHF budget and expenditures and equipment policies with the Director of the SFP. She also fields internship opportunities and coordination, admissions, comp

exams and GTA/ GSA coordination and graduate student advising until committee chairs are in place.

Professor Alexis Pike is the Director of the School of Film and Photography, which is the overarching home of the SNHF program. She oversees the entire department, including faculty and staff, and is the spokesperson for the school. She maintains the smooth running of the entire department, curriculum delivery, budget allocations, teaching assignments, all personnel hiring and management. She is also a professor of photography.

Grad School Assistant (GSA) - a graduate student who works to assist in special projects related to the management of the SNHF including social media, maintaining website updates, archiving MFA films, and special research projects relating to supporting and developing the SNHF community. This position is chosen from a pool of applicants, similar to the GTA process.

Equipment Checkout

Equipment Checkout will be the source of most of your gear, especially during the first year of production. There are very specific guidelines for borrowing and using the SFP film and video equipment. You will be instructed in these procedures as you begin production and during your orientation. You are expected to adhere to the guidelines, as is every student in SFP, graduate and undergraduate. The equipment is a common resource for everyone in the MFA, BFA and BA programs. The gear needs to be used responsibly and safely for the benefit of all users in the department.

Tony Purpura is the Technology Coordinator, a full-time staff member who oversees all equipment checkout and lab space in the building for all our SFP programs, including the graduate edit bay and the new spaces opening in Gianforte hall. Many student employees assist him in this work.

The checkout reservation program is called Connect2 (<https://sfpcheckout.msu.montana.edu/>)

This program requires you to create an account before you can reserve any equipment or rooms. To create this account, you will need your NetID and student ID at our initial orientation; these can be found in your [MyMSU](#) account.

2.0 Master of Fine Arts Degree Requirements

2.1.0 MFA in Science and Natural History Filmmaking program

The Master of Fine Arts degree (MFA) is considered a terminal degree for practicing artists in a variety of disciplines. The SNHF MFA degree attests to both the general knowledge of students and their expertise in the field of documentary film production and practice, integrating a high level of technical expertise and deep theoretical and historical understanding of documentary film forms. The MFA degree indicates an artist can create work that contributes to the contemporary thinking and practice about their form, that they can work independently to conduct rigorous research and practice methods and are prepared to complete work from ideation through to completed film including dissemination of the final work.

All MFA candidates are expected to be familiar with degree requirements for the Graduate School, the College of Arts and Architecture, and the Science and Natural History Filmmaking program. The minimum credit requirement for the SNHF MFA degree is sixty (60) credits. Only those courses listed on an approved graduate Program of Study are applicable toward graduate degree credit requirements.

The SNHF curriculum is designed to be completed in three consecutive years. Required coursework is lockstep; therefore, each student must complete the course in order, with their co-hort. Moving through the curriculum in a cohort model works to build community and a shared experience while building a support system for each student. This model also ensures that foundational courses are mastered before research and production on more complicated projects commence.

2.1 Credit Requirements

SNHF requires a minimum of 60 credits for an MFA in Science and Natural History Filmmaking. Of those 60, 15 credits will be FILM 590 thesis credits. Before enrolling in thesis credits, students will complete 45 credits related to coursework.

2.1.2 Master in Fine Arts Curriculum Requirements

2.1.3 Required Courses

The MFA degree requires a minimum of 60 credit hours. All students must take FILM 510 Fundamentals of Filmmaking, FILM 512 Sound, FILM 504 Film and Documentary History and Theory, FILM 519 Post Production, FILM 515 Advanced Production, FILM 517 Production Management and FILM 505 Critical Approaches to Science and Natural History, in their first year. In the second year students will take FILM 526 Alternative Nonfiction, FILM 523 2nd year Film Prep, FILM 525 2nd year Film Production. These courses have been created to serve as the core of each MFA student's program.

2.1.4 Elective Courses

Students, in consultation with their committee chair and with the approval of the program director, are encouraged to take 500-level courses from the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences that will advance their scholarly interests. The SNHF curriculum allows 10 credits of electives minimum.

In consultation with their committee chair and the approval of the program director, all MFA students may also take up to nine credits of 400-level courses. MFA students, with the approval of the SNHF program director, may take up to (4) FILM 592 independent study credits. In practice, 592 credits are done working alongside a faculty member in SNHF or SFP on the faculty member's current relevant research project in film or photography or crossover projects. On occasion a project may be considered with faculty outside the School of Film and Photography or Montana State. This will be in consultation and with approval of the SNHF program director.

MFA students, with the approval of the SNHF program director, may take up to (4) FILM

598 internship credits. These projects are developed in dialog with the SNHF program director and usually done with a host institution, museum, research center or other organization that can offer a professional working environment and a relevant educational experience for the student.

All independent study and internship projects done for credit will be discussed with the SNHF program director well in advance of the project begin date, require specific paperwork for registration and will be listed on the student program of study.

2.1.5 Course Descriptions and Prerequisites

Science and Natural History Filmmaking course descriptions can be found in the MSU catalog, <https://catalog.montana.edu/coursedescriptions/film/>. "Special Topics" courses are offered each semester in many departments that may be relevant to a student's program. These courses are generally offered as a 481, 491 or 591. Prerequisites vary from course to course, and students are advised to read the catalog carefully and to speak with instructors and advisers about prerequisites. Graduate standing alone does not guarantee admission to a course if the prerequisites have not been met.

2.1.6 Program of Study

The Program of study acts as a contract between the student, the department, the college, the Graduate School, and the University. The Program of Study defines the minimum requirements for the degree and the courses that the student will satisfactorily complete before graduation and awarding of the MFA degree. Students will work primarily with their committee chair for advising and development of a Program of Study.

Before the committee chair has been selected, MFA students will be advised by the program director. Please contact the program director to make an appointment. The program of study is best filed by the end of the first year.

2.1.7. Comprehensive Exams and Other Assessments

First Year Review

Toward the end of the first year in the program, you may be asked to meet individually with the MFA program director to discuss an assessment of your performance and prospects for success in the program. This review will be based on notes from first year instructors in which they share their experiences of your academic performance and professionalism. The intention is to offer you an in-depth evaluation at a critical juncture in the MFA degree process. If a performance review is heavily negative, the faculty may recommend that you leave the program. These meetings will be set by the program director, as determined by need and usefulness.

SNHF Comprehensive Examination

All degree candidates must take and pass the comprehensive examination ("comps") prior to enrolling in thesis credits. The exam is administered during late fall semester or early spring semester of the 2nd year.

The primary graduate faculty will write, administer, and grade the exam. The exam will contain questions covering documentary history, theory, and production and will relate to all coursework done up to the date of the exam including films screened, articles and books assigned, productions and exercises conducted. There may be a practical portion to the exam, as determined by the

current faculty.

The exam is marked high pass, pass, or fail and is graded by the faculty. Generally, students will receive the written results of their exam status via email. If a student receives a failing evaluation from any faculty member on any portion of the exam, the student will fail the exam.

Thesis Defense

A Thesis Defense examination is required as part of the student's oral examination for the MFA degree. The student's approved graduate committee carries out this examination. The student should have prepared and distributed a draft of the Thesis Film and Thesis Paper to the committee at least fourteen (14) business days prior to date of defense. More details on the thesis defense process in SNHF are found in the pages below. There are specific Graduate School Policies that pertain to the thesis defense:

<https://catalog.montana.edu/graduate/#policiestext>

Electronic Theses and Dissertation (ETD)

All thesis papers are submitted to the Graduate School electronically, which is why they are called ETDs (Electronic Theses and Dissertations). The Graduate School's formatting advisor must approve the student's final Thesis Paper. Please review the Graduate School's ETD requirements and reach out to the Formatting Advisor early in the process.

<https://catalog.montana.edu/graduate/policiestext-degree-requirements/#5.5.1>

2.1.8 Timeline to MFA degree & MFA Completion Deadline

The SNHF graduate program is designed to be completed in three years, consecutive. The curriculum is designed to be 'lockstep' and therefore each student must complete the required courses in order with their co-hort. Moving through the curriculum in a cohort works to build a community and a shared experience while providing a support system for each student. This model also ensures that the basics are covered in all production aspects: ideation and research, image creation, audio field and post techniques, editing, post workflows, documentary history and theory, and problems specific to the science and natural history subject area.

The first-year coursework is designed to be foundational in film and media production and documentary history and theory. Each course is designed to work in tandem with the others and builds upon the exercises, papers, and films created. Note that each student must maintain good academic standing in order to continue in the program.

Courses and the order they are taken are found in the SNHF curriculum chart f2026:

Semester course load- 3year	
Fall Year 1	Spring Year 1
FILM 510 Fundamentals of Filmmaking (4cr)	FILM 515 Advanced Production (4cr)
FILM 512 (581) Sound (3)	FILM 505 Critical Approaches (4)
FILM 519 Post Production (3)	FILM 517 Production MGMT (3)
FILM 504 Documentary Theory (4)	
	<i>Program of Study due to the Graduate School</i>

Fall Year 2	Spring Year 2
FILM 523 Second Year film prep (4 credits)	FILM 525 Second Year Film Production (3)
Film 526 Alternative Nonfiction (3)	Elective (6 credits)
Elective (3 credits)	
Independent Study or Internship (1 credit or up to 4)	
<i>Finalize Committee and Committee Chair</i>	<i>Comp Exam complete and graded</i>

Thesis year (45 credits complete before beginning thesis year)

Fall Year 3	Spring Year 3
FILM 590 Thesis (6)	FILM 590 Thesis (9)
	<i>Thesis defense spring of 3rd year</i>

2.1.9. Master of Fine Arts Degree Completion Deadline

The MFA degree defense will be in the spring of the third year, a.k.a., the thesis year. The program operates on a three year timeline. No exceptions. Any deviation from this set schedule is not permitted.

As per the graduate school requirements, the age of courses at the time of graduation may not exceed six (6) years. Please note that the SNHF program timeline is much more condensed: a three year timeline to defense. This timeline is crafted to create momentum through the coursework and film productions, working toward a defense in the spring of the third year. The program operates on a cohort model, so students move through the program together and defend at the same time.

The only deviation to this schedule will require a validated medically necessary extension substantiated through the Office of Disability Services. Further discussion with the program director, and clear communication will be necessary. An extended timeline may be created in extreme circumstances, but not guaranteed and is entirely dependent on the special circumstances related to health, the resources available at the time, and the faculty reviewing the case.

2.1.10 Links to Additional Resources for SNHF MFA degree.

The Graduate School Resources:

General degree requirements:

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/degreq_general.html

Other Resources:

Electronic Theses and Dissertations: <http://www.montana.edu/wwwetd/>

SNHF Course Descriptions: <https://catalog.montana.edu/coursedescriptions/film/>

SFP Photo Course Descriptions: <https://catalog.montana.edu/coursedescriptions/phot/>

2.2.0 MFA Timeline descriptions by year of program

All MFA candidates are expected to be familiar with degree requirements for the Graduate School, School of Film and Photo and the Science and Natural History Filmmaking program. The minimum credit requirement for the SNHF Master of Fine Arts degree is sixty (60) credits. Only those courses listed on an approved graduate Program of Study are applicable toward graduate degree credit requirements. An MFA thesis film will be 10-15 minutes in length, and an MFA thesis paper will be approximately 20 pages. Specific guidelines for the thesis film and paper are included in this handbook and may be updated on a yearly basis.

2.2.1 SNHF First year

The first year of the program is considered foundational. Film production goals will include several production exercises designed to build skills towards a short film completed in the first semester. The second semester will expand on these skills and results in the 'the first year film,' considered by many students to be their first portfolio piece.

2.2.2 SNHF Second year

The second year of the program pivots around the research and production of the 'second year film.' Students will also be expanding their understanding of image creation, film form,

contemporary documentary forms and may elect to take courses that deepen their understanding of topics such as environmental humanities, Native Americans and cinema, national cinemas, special topics in cinema studies, and/ or more advanced level technical skills as available.

Students will be expected to begin the semester with viable ideas for a short documentary film, 7-10 minutes in length. Each student will develop their topic for the 2nd year film in consultation and mentorship with the instructor of the 2nd year film prep course. Films will be independently produced, and students will be expected to have sole creative control of the project. Traditionally the first semester of the second year is spent in preproduction with guidance from the instructor in preparing all aspects of production. There may be travel limits for this film as dictated by the course instructor, along with other parameters that are designed to help craft a successful 2nd year film production experience. In the spring students begin production and complete post production under the guidance of their 2nd year film course instructor. The instructor of the course will oversee the production and completion of the second-year film. This film must be completed by finals week. "Completed" means that the film is ready for public exhibition, with final sound mix, color correction, titles, captioning and all proper credits in place. No exceptions.

2.2.3 Thesis year

MFA candidates spend their third year in research, production, and post-production on their thesis films and thesis papers. This work is done in consultation with the candidate's committee chair who will mentor the student and approve the thesis film and paper topics. Note, all course work credits must be completed before a student is approved to enroll in thesis credits. Your program of study should reflect this planning.

Thesis Film

Thesis films will be original productions, 10-15 minutes in length, that reflect ideas generated by the MFA candidate. The thesis film is an independent production, not made for an agency or non-profit or any other entity desiring creative control of the film. MFA candidates are encouraged to choose topics that they are passionate about, have ample access to, and therefore can visit repeatedly for production purposes. Ideally the film will reflect the skills and comprehension gained throughout the SNHF coursework.

Thesis film proposal

Toward the end of the 2nd year students will prepare for enrolling in thesis credits to begin the thesis year. This will require meeting with their committee chair and writing their thesis proposal. The goal is to craft a thesis year plan in consultation with the committee chair who will act as the mentor for the project. Thesis proposals will require the following: chair and committee members' names; preliminary timeline and schedule for the thesis film and paper; details about your film topic, the story and documentary approach; an annotated filmography and bibliography detailing works that have informed the thesis project and that help place your work in a broad context of documentary film. Students will meet and discuss with their committee chair the exact requirements for the proposal and approval process PRIOR to any approval of production dates or equipment reservation.

Students who do not meet with their chair prior to the thesis year will not be permitted to enroll in thesis credits and will jeopardize their good standing in the program, and thus their ability to defend on time and receive a degree.

Thesis Paper

The thesis film will be accompanied by a thesis paper. Your chair will provide you with the current thesis paper guidelines to follow. In general the paper will include a link to the candidate's website with specific material made available to the committee; the paper will also include, an artist statement and bio, a logline and synopsis of the thesis film, and a detailed written section that demonstrates your personal connection to the material, the research you did to understand your topic and the way your film is informed by or in dialog with the broad field of documentary. MFA candidates should be able to clearly place their film in a context that demonstrates an awareness of the traditions within which they are working. Additionally, students will be asked to summarize their crew, detail their production budget and their distribution / festival plan for the film post defense.

Thesis Course meeting

SNHF is developing a weekly course meeting time for the thesis students throughout the academic year. This will be a meeting of the cohort members and the primary graduate faculty who serve as chairs. This course meeting time and place is in development and will be implemented on a rolling basis. The goal is to guide and mentor thesis film progress and keep students moving toward a successful defense. Students will be expected to attend this meeting weekly with updates, presentations, feedback for peers, and guest speaker visits as scheduled.

Note: Failure to communicate with the committee chair on a regular basis during the thesis year is grounds for being dropped from thesis credits and dismissal from the SNHF program. The communication and meeting schedule will be crafted in consultation with the thesis committee chair prior to enrolling in thesis credits. It is the responsibility of the MFA candidate to reach out to their chair, and craft a meeting schedule and progress check ins. The student is expected to initiate this meeting.

If the student fails to communicate regularly with the chair as scheduled, they will be considered failing the thesis credits.

A student who fails thesis credits will be dropped from the program. Thesis credits are pass/ fail and graded by the committee chair. At the minimum, thesis students must demonstrate to their chair that they are making sufficient progress toward their thesis defense. Failure to communicate with the committee chair will constitute a failure of the thesis credits.

2.2.4 Film Ownership and rights

All productions that students create as final projects in each course and the thesis films are owned entirely by the student who is the producer of the film. SNHF will retain the right to use the films in part or whole as promotional films on the SNHF website and other recruitment outlets and will work with the students on the timing of this use so that it does not conflict or interfere with film festival or other special screenings in the distribution plan.

All productions completed as work in the SNHF program and that were considered progress toward credits and the MFA degree will include in their end credits the following language:

Produced as part of the degree requirements for the MFA in Science and Natural
History Filmmaking Program in the School of Film and Photography, Montana
State University-Bozeman

3.0 Progress toward a Degree

3.1. Academic Expectations

MSU's Student Responsibilities, Academic Expectations, and Code of Conduct can be found within the Conduct Guidelines and Grievance Procedures for Students here:

https://www.montana.edu/policy/student_conduct/index.html.

3.1.1. University Academic Standing

The information contained in subsections 3.1.1.2 -3.1.1.4 are drawn directly from the Graduate School's policies regarding grades and academic standing. Please visit the main page using this link:

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/grades_academicstanding.html.

The information contained in subsections 3.1.1.5 and 3.1.1.6 are drawn directly from the Graduate School's policies regarding Enrollment (Registration) and Residency. Please visit the main page using this link:

<http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/enrollment.html>.

3.1.1.1. Good standing

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/grades_academicstanding.html#good

3.1.1.2. College probation

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/grades_academicstanding.html

University probation

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/grades_academicstanding.html#prob_susp

3.1.1.3. Suspension and dismissal

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/grades_academicstanding.html#prob_susp

3.1.1.4. University withdrawals

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/enrollment.html#univ_wd

3.1.1.5. Re-admission to graduate degree standing

http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/enrollment.html#univ_wd

3.1.1.6. Academic program implications given University academic standing

If a graduate student's GPA falls below 3.00, they will be unable to serve as a GTA or a GRA. They may be placed on probation or suspended from the SNHF degree program.

3.1.1.7. Departmental guidelines for tracking unsatisfactory academic progress

If the Program deems a student's academic progress to be unsatisfactory, the student shall be notified in writing of the Program's evaluation. The student may appeal this evaluation

in writing to the SNHF department within two (2) weeks of receiving the notification.

3.2. First year Review of Academic Progress

At the end of the first academic year in the program students may be asked to meet with the SNHF program director for an assessment of their performance. Students will be contacted, in writing via university email, to schedule these meetings. The student will be notified as to whether their academic performance meets, falls below, or does not meet Program expectations. If the SNHF program primary graduate faculty deems a student's academic progress to be unsatisfactory, they may be asked to leave the program.

3.3. Professional Conduct Expectations and Assessment Criteria

3.3.1. Professional and ethical behavior

Research Compliance <http://www.montana.edu/orc/>

3.3.2. Academic dishonesty

<http://www.montana.edu/facultyexcellence/Papers/cheating.html>

3.3.3. Disciplinary action & dismissal policy

http://www.montana.edu/policy/student_conduct/

3.3.4. Student academic grievance and appeal process

http://www.montana.edu/policy/student_conduct/

4.0 Advising and Committee Formation

4.1 Formation of a Graduate Committee

Your graduate committee is the key to your success and must be formed in consultation with your committee chair and the program director.

As stipulated by the Graduate School, committees must consist of at least three (3) members for Master of Fine Arts candidates. The chair must be a tenure-track or tenured professor at Montana State University. The committee chair will be one of the primary graduate faculty and students will be given notice of these professors at the time of committee selection. The remaining committee members must be full time SFP tenure-track or tenured faculty members not on academic leave during the year of the defense.

In selecting a committee chair, graduate students will want to consider the following: a faculty member's intellectual interests and expertise, the relevance of a faculty member's

expertise to the student's research and interests, courses taken with a faculty member, faculty member availability, and the student's working relationship with the faculty member. The Graduate School policies require the student to have a committee chair by *the third semester* in the SNHF program.

Students will be notified of the timeline for chair and committee formation not later than the end of the third semester. The SNHF program coordinator will communicate with the students in the cohort of eligible faculty for chairing committees and those eligible for committee membership. This notification will be via MSU email addresses on file. There will be a hard deadline to submit committee and chair preferences.

The program director will work with the program coordinator to finalize the committee chair and member assignments. All student preferences will be taken into account and every effort will be made to match student choice in regard to the chair.

Faculty contracts, sabbaticals, other leaves and workload may prevent some faculty members from agreeing to serve on a committee or as chair.

The chair of the graduate student's committee has two primary responsibilities: 1) to guide the student through the student's coursework, research, and thesis film production and written thesis paper; and 2) to preside over the student's thesis defense. Other committee members must also be consulted about the film and the paper.

Graduate students work primarily with their chair to develop clear expectations, processes, and deadlines for the film development, research, production, post production and finishing and the written paper. However, the student must also keep their full committee informed about the progress towards the degree.

The remaining members of a graduate committee primarily serve as readers of the final paper and viewers of the films. However, they may also take on a much more active role. They are strongly encouraged to provide written comments on film rough cuts and paper drafts.

SNHF MFA candidates must deliver the final film and paper to the full committee and chair at least two full weeks prior to the scheduled defense. This is in the best interest of the candidate as the committee needs time to review the work. The candidate hopes to avoid any surprises at the defense. The candidate will work with the chair to ensure the paper and the film are ready for on time distribution to the full committee.

4.1.1 Formation of Thesis Committee Paperwork

Students will complete the "Graduate Committee form" once the process of chair/committee selection is completed. This form is accessed thru the MYMSU portal and / or here: <https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/forms.html>
When you receive the email confirmation from the Graduate School that your Graduate Committee Request has been successfully completed, you may begin working toward completion of the program of study and mapping your plan to degree completion in more detail.

Changing your committee

At any time during the thesis process, a faculty member may resign as Chair or as a committee member. You may also decide to change chairs or Committee members. If you wish to make these changes, please speak with the program coordinator for instructions on this process.

4.2 Role of Advisor

MFA students will initially be advised by the Program Director and the SNHF Program Coordinator, who will assist them in the first-year course registration. Once a committee and chair are formed and selected, the committee chair typically performs the duties of advisor for the student.

4.3 Developing a Program of Study with Chair and Committee

Students will consult with their chair to help complete their program of study, which is essentially a plan for the coursework and strategy for the timing of an internship or independent study.

The Program of Study outlines the coursework that the student plans to complete to gain the necessary credits for their degree. Working with their chair, consulting the course catalog, reaching out to professors of record for selected electives and even consulting the committee if they are available, students select courses and form a plan for their program of study that includes the required courses in SNHF for all students, and those course that best suit their individual interests for their SNHF degree and plans for post graduation.

The program of study form will be completed after the chair is selected and the committee official “graduate committee request form” is done. The program of Study form is accessed thru the My MSU portal and on the graduate school website under forms:

<https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/forms.html>

Comprehensive Exams

5.0.1 SNHF MFA Degree Comprehensive Exams

Written Comprehensive Exam

Students will take a written comp exam in their 2nd year.

The exam will be developed by the primary graduate faculty and will be comprehensive covering the coursework to the date of exam. The exam will be done at a specific time, or span of time, and have a specific, hard due date.

Practical exam. The primary graduate faculty may decide to schedule a formal practical or oral exam in lieu of or in addition to the written comp exam. IF this is the case students will receive at least two weeks notice of the exam schedule, with time and location and dates assigned.

The exam will again be comprehensive covering all coursework to date of exam.

There are no exceptions to the schedule or location of the exam once it is posted.

The exam will be graded by the primary graduate faculty and/or the SNHF advisory committee. The outcomes are : High Pass, Pass and Fail. Students will receive a brief summary evaluations via MSUemail within 2-4 weeks after the exam.

If a student receives a failing evaluation from any faculty member on any portion of the exam, the student will fail the exam. If a student fails the comp exam, the graduate school has policies in place for the procedure to follow:

FAILED EXAMINATION — The student is allowed two (2) total attempts to pass the comprehensive examination. At least six (6) months must elapse before the second (2nd) attempt at the examination. Failure to pass the second (2nd) attempt results in termination of graduate study and dismissal from the academic program. Students who are dismissed from the program due to a second (2nd) failed attempt are ineligible to reapply to the same degree program.

6.0 Thesis Defense

The graduate school has specific deadlines as to the last date to defend thesis and complete all paperwork. Thesis defenses will be scheduled in compliance with these deadlines.

As per MSU and MSU Graduate school requirements: The candidate must be registered for a minimum of three (3) credits at MSU during the term in which the defense is held. Defenses for MFA candidates will be for a three (3) hour block of time.

6.1. Scheduling of the Defense.

Students should have prepared and distributed their thesis film and paper to the committee at least fourteen (14) business days prior to date of defense. required. no exceptions.

MFA thesis defenses are scheduled as a three (3) hour block. They will take place in the final four weeks of the third-year spring semester. Depending on cohort size, and committee members, and scheduling, the times slots and rooms may be assigned. Although the graduate school schedule may list a 'last day to defend' date as ten days prior to the end of the semester, your date may fall much earlier than this, up to a month before the end of the spring semester.

6.2.0 Announcement

The thesis title, date, time, and location of the defense must be announced publicly at least two weeks prior to the defense date through normal University media channels, including emails. You must email the departmental GSA, supplying a professional PHOTO or head shot, a film still, the title, logline, and short synopsis of your thesis film for this announcement protocol. Do not skip this step.

6.3.0 Structure of the SNHF MFA Defense.

Friends, colleagues, faculty, and the general public may be invited to attend the opening portion of the defense. The faculty chair of the committee will start the defense and generally this begins with remarks from the MFA candidate about their research and film, a reflection

on their process, highlights of their website and then a screening of the film.

The candidate prepares all technical details prior to the start of the defense.

A brief Q&A with the gathered group follows the screening. As dictated by the faculty chair, the public portion ends, usually within the first hour.

The private portion of the defense includes the chair, the full committee and the candidate. The MFA candidate will be prepared to discuss different aspects of the film, their process, choices and final creative decisions. They will also be prepared to discuss in depth any issues, questions, or remarks regarding the written portion of the thesis.

As dictated by the faculty chair, the MFA candidate will be asked to depart the room briefly so that the committee may deliberate in private. The decision of a "pass" or "fail" judgment will be made. A majority of members must vote in favor of passing. You are then asked to return to the room, and the committee delivers their decision.

The Committee may request changes to the film and/or written thesis to be made prior to final submission. Your degree will not be granted until these final changes have been submitted and confirmed by the committee chair. As dictated by the faculty chair, these revisions may need to be seen by the entire committee or solely the chair.

7.0 Post defense and Final steps to graduate

It is very common that at the defense a candidate will receive feedback from the chair or the committee that requires further revision of the paper or film. These final changes will be made clear at the defense and the final steps to take to make sure they are complete. This usually is done with a final meeting with the chair, who then approves all committee members to sign off on the defense as complete. This process is case by case and not set in stone.

In addition to any changes that may or may not be requested, there are a series of steps the candidate must take to finalize all paperwork that ensures graduate and awarding of the MFA degree.

7.1.0 Forms and Paperwork post defense in SNHF:

7.1.1 Rights & Clearances

The candidate will ensure that all music, literary, material, location, and personal release rights are cleared before the thesis defense. If there are any rights encumbrances, the thesis may be rejected by The Graduate School or SFP, even if successfully defended. The form that acknowledges all clearances is found on the SNHF webpage under FORMS, titled Film/Video/ Digital File Submission Form, and should be submitted at the time you give your files to be archived.

- [Film/Video/Digital File Submission Form](#)

7.1.2_ SNHF acknowledgement credits

All thesis films MUST have the MFA acknowledgment in the final credits of the thesis film, preferably at the conclusion of the film's credits right above or before the copyright notice. If the exact wording is not included, the film is considered incomplete and can be challenged even after its submission to the Graduate School. The acknowledgment must appear on all copies and versions of the film. An MSU logo is not required.

Produced as part of the degree requirements for the MFA in Science and
Natural History Filmmaking Program in the School of Film and
Photography,
Montana State University-Bozeman

7.1.3 ETD Formatting step

In your defense semester, you must have already submitted a minimum of two drafts of your thesis paper for formatting revisions and corrections prior to the defense deadline of submitting the final written thesis to The Electronic Theses and Dissertations Formatting Information in the Submission Portal for final approval. The submission portal can be found on The Graduate School website at [https:// www.montana.edu/etd/](https://www.montana.edu/etd/)

7.1.4 Report on Comprehensive Exam/Thesis Defense, Master's and Doctoral

This form is initiated by the SNHF program Coordinator, Colette Campbell. The MFA candidate should follow up to insure all forms are circulating and gaining signatures.

7.2.0 Forms to graduate

Students need to be familiar with the graduate school policies regarding graduation and the requirements of the university beyond SNHF policies. These are found on the graduate school website at the following link. Some highlights are further linked below.
https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/degreq_commencement.html#commencement_extension

7.2.1 Application to graduate:

https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/degreq_commencement.html#commencement_app

7.2.2 1 credit extension policies:

https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/degreq_commencement.html#commencement_extension

7.3 Archiving the film & paper

Archiving the FILM for the Department:

After the defense and all final changes requested, the approved film will be submitted to the SNHF Graduate assistant for archiving in the department. The film will also be submitted alongside the paper to the ETD submission portal.

For the department: An H.264 compressed mp4 file, a high-resolution Apple ProRes

QuickTime uncompressed file, the thesis paper, the SFP Film/Video/ Digital File Submission form, and the paragraph description of the film must be submitted to the SNHF Graduate Student Assistant (GSA) for archiving in the SFP database. Please test these to make sure they are BOTH viewable before sending or arranging for the files to be dropped off.

Archiving the FILM for the University:

A separate .vtt file type to meet MSU Library closed caption requirements will need to be made. You can do this by:

- 1) uploading your final video to [Panopto](#) which has an automatic captioning feature (always check & edit for accuracy)
- 2) [downloading the caption file from Panopto](#)
- 3) converting the caption file to .vtt using a free subtitle converter ([GoTranscript](#) has worked well before).

The file will be uploaded through the graduate school's ETD formatting portal. As of this writing this link is found here:

https://www.montana.edu/etd/_archived/submission.html#submit_procedure

In the event the final film submitted to the Graduate School is more than 5 GB, please contact the submission advisor at gradformatting@montana.edu. It is your responsibility to submit the final film to the Graduate School.

A Note about the MFA Archiving and Web Access Policy: The MFA website includes a searchable database of the SNHF thesis films that will permit online viewing of thesis films. Films may not be downloaded. This database mirrors the written thesis accessibility, involving all graduate degree-granting departments on campus, available through The Graduate School at <http://etd.lib.montana.edu/etd/view/>. The SFP and MSU may make the thesis films accessible in whole or in part (for example, on the MFA website) as indicated in the Student Agreement Section of the Certificate of Approval Form for Theses and Dissertations signed by each student upon the successful completion of the thesis defense. The default action will be to make the thesis film accessible through the site. If a student does not wish to make the thesis film immediately available through the site, the student must request the one-year delay option on the Certificate of Approval. If an exception is granted, a notice will appear on the site indicating that the thesis film is available by contacting the MSU Library, where the films are deposited after submission to The Graduate School.

Archiving the paper

Your thesis paper, in its final approved form post MFA defense and final approval of the committee chair, will be submitted to the graduate schools ETD submission portal: (as of this writing the information is found here)

https://www.montana.edu/etd/_archived/submission.html#submit_procedure

Only upon submission of all of the above materials is your thesis considered complete. The Committee Chair and/or Program Director will direct the Program Coordinator to submit the final Thesis Defense Report to the Grad School.

8.0 Other Departmental and University Policies of note

SNHF operates within the School of Film and Photography and Montana State University. As such all policies regarding student code of conduct apply. Below are policies that may be unique to SNHF and that are highlighted as reminders.

8.1.0 Registering for Courses in the MFA Program

SNHF curriculum is primarily a lock-step curriculum, which means many of your courses will be done in order, within a cohort. SNHF courses are restricted entry, meaning that students must have special permission to take these courses. The SNHF Program Coordinator registers you in all SNHF courses each semester. An e-mail is sent to each cohort of MFA students each semester as their registration is complete.

It is your responsibility to arrange and inform the Program Coordinator, Colette Campbell, if you intend to take an internship, or independent study, or any other course outside the SNHF curriculum.

These are your responsibilities:

Confirm your student account is free from any holds.

MyMSU > Student Services > Student Records > View Holds

Check your MyMSU account regularly each semester. Verify that you are registered for the correct courses.

Confirming your bill confirms your attendance with MSU.

This must be done by every student at the beginning of every semester. The Registrar will automatically drop you from classes any semester you fail to confirm your bill/attendance.

MyMSU > Student Services > Student Records > Electronic Billing and Payment > Select the Term > Confirm Bill

Schedule of Classes

The Schedule of Classes can be found MyMSU > Schedule of Classes - find CRN (Course Registration Number) here.

This tool will be helpful looking for the elective courses you will choose to build your program of study. It lists which courses are offered in the coming semester. In general, it is accurate for departments but if you want to verify, you should contact the department offering the course directly and/or speak with the SNHF program director or your committee chair.

Important Registration Concerns & Considerations of note:

- International Students need to be registered for nine credits each semester (excluding your final thesis semester).
- Graduate Teaching Assistants and those receiving other Financial Aid must be registered for at least six credits each semester, unless you are in your thesis defense semester.
- Students living in On-Campus Housing must be registered for at least seven credits each semester.

- To be automatically covered by MSU's Health Insurance, you must be registered for a minimum of seven credits each semester.
- All courses you register for must be at the 500 level or above. In some cases, 400 level undergraduate courses may be taken for credit toward your MFA degree. Discuss this with your SNHF program director or committee chair.

Please review [MSU's Graduate Policies](#) or talk with the Division of Graduate Education for further information. Not all policies are listed here.

8.1.2 Absences: Each instructor will have their own policies regarding absences from class and you should consult the course syllabus to determine what that policy is.

The curriculum requires you to attend class. If opportunities arise or other conflicts that prohibit you from attending class as required, please withdraw from the course. In a lock-step curriculum, withdrawing from one course means withdrawing from the program and you will need to discuss this with the SNHF program director.

8.1.3. Incompletes.

SNHF follows all departmental and university policies regarding incompletes in a course. Incomplete grades are generally for students who become ill or have other emergencies late in the semester. Students eligible for Incompletes should have consistently completed four-fifths of the assigned work during the semester in a timely fashion. If you feel you merit an Incomplete, talk to your course instructor.

Please note the following very carefully: All responsibility falls upon you to complete the coursework and to complete it on time. An Incomplete will automatically turn into an "F" on the expiration date. Once you have been given an "F", that grade then becomes a permanent part of your academic record.

Do not expect to be reminded by the instructor, the department, or the university that you have an incomplete or that your deadline for completion is approaching.

8.2.0 Laptop Requirements

All incoming SNHF students must have their own laptop computer.

All MSU School of Film and Photography digital labs are in the MAC universe, which means all of your instruction will be taught on high end MAC stations regardless of what platform you have traditionally worked on or may bring with you. Incoming students have received updated specs on the computing speed and memory recommended for ease of use with video and audio files.

8.2.1. Adobe Campus License

As of this writing, one full license of the Adobe Creative Cloud suite will be available to each of you as students at Montana State University to download onto your personal computer. This program is administered thru UIT and info can be found here:

<https://www.montana.edu/uit/purchase/adobe/>

8.3.0. MFA List-Serve, Facebook Page, and Other Services

The SNHF program maintains an active email list-serve. During the year we send important notices and information via the list-serve. Please keep your contact information current with the SNHF

Program Coordinator, Colette Campbell.

The SNHF Facebook group page is an invaluable resource that links you to fellow MFA students and program alumni all over the world. This is a private group, maintained by alumni. You will receive instructions on how to join during orientation. Please consider joining this group as it becomes a great resource for networking and employment opportunities. We also maintain our Instagram page fairly regularly. @sciencenature.film

9.0 Funding & Financial Information

A limited number of SFP Graduate Teaching Assistant positions are open each year. These are distributed through a competitive selection process. These positions offer a stipend, in-state tuition rates, and up to twelve credits tuition waivers. There are also occasional work opportunities related to grant work and professional filming that will occur throughout your time in the program and will be announced to all students.

The Program Coordinator will issue a call for applications for Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) and Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA) and Graduate Student Assistantship (GSA) positions when available. Applications will be reviewed by the SNHF Advisory Committee and / or the SNHF Program Director. Graduate Research Assistantships are often the result of grants written by faculty. These may or may not open to all students in the program.

Both GTA and GRA positions are competitive.

9.1 Eligibility for GTA / GRA / GSA Positions Support

Graduate students who wish to be considered for a GTA, GRA, or GSA position, when they become available, must be in good academic standing with a GPA of at least 3.00. The Graduate School's various policies regarding Graduate Appointments can be found here: <http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/appointments.html>.

9.2 GTA and GRA Responsibilities and Union Bargaining Agreement

Responsibilities for appointments depend on the course or research and the instructor or faculty member that the student is assisting. Typically, the GTA is responsible for, attending the main course meeting, grading assignments, reserving and delivering relevant equipment for course labs, recitations and studios that require equipment, and holding the required number of office hours. For a GRA position, the student is assigned to a faculty member for a given semester to assist that faculty member with the faculty member's research.

The department GSA has very specific duties relating to the ongoing functioning of the SNHF program and will work with the SNHF program coordinator and program director, the SFP business operations manager, and on occasion the SFP director.

All GTAs and GRAs and GSAs must be a member of the Graduate Employee Organization (GEO) bargaining unit. The current bargaining agreement can be found here: <http://mus.edu/hr/cba/collbarg.asp>.

The following procedures and protocols must be observed by all GTAs assisting courses in the School of Film and Photography (SFP). A graduate teaching assistantship (GTA) is a paid position and each GTA is an employee of Montana State University (MSU). As with all other MSU employees GTAs have attendance and performance requirements that must be fulfilled. Failure to do so can result in a reduction of the stipend and/or fee waiver or, in the worst cases, dismissal.

By signing your GTA contract and initialing this list of procedures and protocols, you agree to observe these requirements:

Each GTA must remain an SFP graduate student in good standing, which, at minimum means maintaining a B average and making steady progress towards the MFA in Science and Natural History Filmmaking degree. This includes progress toward the thesis if a GTA is in their thesis year. Students who stop attending courses or fail courses or stop communicating with their thesis advisor will lose their GTA position. This will result in immediate loss of the tuition waiver accompanying stipend, and you will owe additional tuition payments to the university.

Each GTA must register for at least six credits to be eligible for this position. Tuition will be waived for up to 12 credits for each semester taught, depending on their assignment.

Before the start of each semester of a GTA appointment, the GTA agrees to initiate a meeting with the instructor or instructors with whom the GTA will be working. The GTA must ensure the meeting takes place and should take the initiative to contact the instructor(s). This may be reaching out by email, stopping by their office, and doing so until contact has been made.

There are no unexcused absences for GTAs. If a GTA will miss a class for any reason, including illness or a death in the family, the GTA must inform the instructor(s) as far ahead of the date of the absence as possible and make arrangements for a replacement if the faculty requires support.

Any known travel (for example, to attend a festival or film production), requires that the GTA inform the instructor(s) at least one week before the semester begins. Discuss and sort the plan for the travel.

GTAs must make every effort to find a replacement for their position during an absence for film or festival travel. If no other GTA is available, the instructor(s) and the SNHF Program Director must be advised immediately so other arrangements may be made.

Any absence of more than one week must be approved in writing (e-mails are acceptable) before the dates of the absence take place. Please follow this protocol even in cases of illness or a death in the family: any absence of more than a week.

Failure to observe the above procedures and protocols may be grounds for reduced pay or dismissal in accordance with university regulations and procedures.

Email the SNHF Program Director about any prolonged absence as soon as practical, so that accommodation can be made in these emergency situations.

9.3 GTA / GRA / GSA Tuition Waiver Policy and Waiver Limits.

Graduate students with teaching or research appointments receive tuition waivers for a certain number of course credits, depending on the number of hours they work for their appointment. Graduate students should not be working over an average of nineteen (19) hours per week. The Graduate School policies for tuition waivers can be found here: http://www.montana.edu/gradschool/policy/appointments.html#appointments_waiver.

9.4 GSA, GTA and/or GRA Evaluation

GSAs, GTAs and GRAs are evaluated on their performance at the end of each semester by their supervisory instructor or faculty member that the appointment was under. These are currently DOCUSIGN forms initiated by the GSA/ GTA/ GRA. here:

<https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/forms.html>

10. Links to resources

More Helpful Weblinks:

<https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/wellness/index.html>

<https://sfp.montana.edu/sciencenaturefilm/>

<https://sfp.montana.edu/>

[Bounty of the Bridgers Campus emergency food pantry](#)

[International Student and Scholar Services](#)

[Professional Development: Grad Cat 360](#)

[Graduate School Dates and Deadlines](#)

[Office of the Registrar for students](#)

[Grad Employee Org Contract](#)