

# Writing a Master's Thesis

## Definition

A master's thesis is a piece of original academic research designed to address a set of scholarly questions related to media communication. It draws on theory learned in the core courses, includes a review of relevant literature, and should demonstrate a student's ability to use an appropriate research method to answer the questions posed. Length varies, but a completed thesis typically ranges from about 75 pages to 150 pages.

For general guidelines from the Graduate College, go to <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~graduate/student/thesis.html>

## General Procedure and Timeline

The last step completed for graduation, a thesis is carried out by a student in consultation with a faculty chair and two other members of a faculty committee. A student should plan on at *least* two semesters for completion. During this time, the student is typically enrolled in MC 6640 (Thesis). This not a regular course with set meeting times, but is, instead, a special type of independent study supervised by the chair. A minimum of six credits of MC 6640 are required. Students who need more time or want to work more slowly can enroll in additional semesters of MC 6640 credit or take only one or two credits per semester. However, GAs should be aware that they must be enrolled in at least six credits per semester in order to retain their position as a GA unless it is their final semester.

Generally, students work most closely with the chair to develop the project, although the other members should be consulted for their expertise. Once the chair has provided feedback on one or more drafts and believes the thesis is ready for the final step, it is sent to the full committee and an *oral defense* is held at which the student answers questions about the research. Thesis defenses are open to other members of the academic community as well. After the thesis has been defended, any necessary revisions are made, and the chair and committee sign off, the thesis is filed with the Graduate College, where it must obtain the approval of the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Students should be aware that the date by which a completed and defended thesis must be filed with the Graduate College typically comes *five to six weeks before the end of the semester* (i.e. in late November for fall graduation and late March for spring graduation). It is up to the student, in consultation with the committee chair, to come up with an appropriate timeline to meet deadlines. Not all chairs work the same way, and some may want to have a pre-defense meeting with the full committee. However, below is a *sample* timeline for a thesis to be filed March 26, 2010, for spring 2010 graduation:

- Early fall: By the time the semester begins or very soon after, you should choose your chair and plan your project. In consultation with the chair, select two other committee members. Work on proposal (see below for proposal details). It is highly recommended that you choose your chair and committee before the fall

semester or during the previous school year. It is never too soon to begin planning for your thesis and working on its preliminary stages.

- Early November: In-person proposal meeting with full committee. This protects you from having a person on your committee who does not fully understand or support your work and allows you to get feedback from all members together.
- November-February: You work on the thesis, in consultation with your chair and other members as needed. It is imperative to stay in touch with the chair, provide drafts, and get feedback. Since MC 6640 does not meet at formal times, it is up to you to schedule this and/or work via e-mail etc.
- February 26: Final draft to thesis chair (this would give the chair a week to read and get it back to you, and allow a week for you to make final changes for the committee)
- March 12: Final draft to full committee, with approval of chair (note: You should always plan to give faculty members at least one week to read your work possibly longer if the approval time coincides scheduled breaks or other professional demands on faculty.)
- March 19: Thesis defense (so you have a week to make any changes before filing)
- March 26: File completed thesis in Graduate College, Sam Ingram Building
- May 8: Graduate!

For an MTSU Graduate College calendar, go to  
<http://frank.mtsu.edu/~graduate/student/calendar.html>

**Note on Institutional Review:** If your research involves the collection of new, original data from human participants (e.g. interviews, focus groups, surveys or experiments) rather than the use of publicly available data (e.g. textual or content analyses or analysis collected by others and published online) you will need to complete the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to ensure that your research is ethical. See <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~irb/> for details, and allow yourself enough time to complete and submit the required forms and obtain approval from the IRB, which only meets to review proposals about once a month. You will need IRB approval before actually starting your research, so see your advisor early about this.

### **Choosing a Chair and Committee Members**

You will spend a lot of time working with your chair, so it's good to have one whom you believe you can have a good working relationship with. You should also trust that person's feedback. Hopefully, your chair brings out the best in you, and makes you stretch intellectually. The person should also have the time to give you the feedback you need. Beyond that, your chair should be someone who understands your project and whose area of expertise includes similar topics and theories. It is very important to choose a chair who works with the methods you want to use; a quantitative chair for a qualitative project, or vice versa, rarely works.

It's good if the expertise of the chair and committee members complement one another. For example, if you want to write an ethnographic project on feminist bloggers, you might want a chair who knows ethnography well and perhaps one committee

member who does feminist analysis and another versed in online media. If you want to conduct an experiment to determine how political messages posted on Web sites like YouTube affect peoples' perceptions of the candidate(s) delivering those messages, you might want a chair with a solid background in social scientific methods and perhaps committee members who specialize in political communication and new media, respectively.

How do you get people to be on your committee? Go to their offices and ask them. Be prepared to discuss the reasons *why* you would like that particular faculty member to be on your committee, such as common research interests, experience in a class she or he has taught, etc.

Once you've chosen, all committee members should sign a ***Master's Thesis Committee form***, available from the program director or administrative assistant. When it's signed, return it to the program's administrative assistant. (If you change committee members, you'll need to fill out a new one.) ***The form is important.*** It provides documentation of a commitment that you and your faculty committee have made to one another, ensuring that you have the committee you need and helping faculty keep track of time committed.

## **Structure of a Thesis**

Generally, a thesis begins with a ***Proposal*** which provides an overview and rationale for the research, a review of relevant literature, an explanation of theory, a set of research questions, and a discussion of what method you'll use to answer the question. A draft of such a project is usually completed in the required research methods courses. If you like a project you do in one of those courses, you can revise and expand it for the thesis; if not, you can use the techniques you learned to write a new one. In the completed thesis, the Proposal may become the first few chapters. Most proposals comprise 20-30 pages.

It is strongly recommended that you look at one or more theses, available from faculty members or in the MTSU library.

### **The Proposal in Detail**

- I. ***Introduction:*** Like the introduction to a shorter paper, this tells your reader what you plan to do, how you will approach it, and why it's worthwhile. It should state your overall question or hypothesis in a general way and give the reader an overview of how you envision finding the answer. It should answer the "So what?" question that all researchers have to deal with, i.e. it should provide a clear explanation and argument for why this research adds to knowledge.
- II. ***Theoretical Framework:*** In this section, discuss the theory (or sometimes set of interrelated theories) you plan to use. In its broadest sense, theory is a lens through which you see the topic, but you should think about which theories learned in MC 6000 or MC 6010 give you insight and help you address the research questions you raise. This is a highly interdisciplinary field, so you may also want to draw on other theories relevant to your topic.

- III. The **Literature Review** comes next. It's often more time-consuming than expected, so don't hesitate to start early. In this section, you provide brief summaries of work done by other academics that is relevant to your *topic*. Doing this shows that there is a gap in the literature--one you plan to fill!--and thus helps you build your argument for the value of your work. This section may be divided in sections, beginning with a statement such as "This research draws on three areas of research: prior studies on stereotypes of women in media, academic studies of the country music industry, and work dealing with music videos and the 'MTV effect.'" You then summarize work in each area, discussing their relevance and interconnections. At the end of this process, it should be clear that despite previous work done, no one has brought these issues together in quite the same way that *you* will. This leads naturally, then, into and informs your research questions.
- IV. **Research Questions**: This section is short, and sometimes is simply put at the end of the Lit Review. State your question or questions clearly and somewhat formally. Sometimes there is a broad overarching question, with small sub-questions. In quantitative work, you may have numbered hypotheses (H1, H2, etc.) and/or numbered questions (RQ1, RQ2, etc.) that explicitly identify the relationships between variables that you intend to examine. In qualitative work, it is more likely to be written as a paragraph or two. Consult your advisor and committee.
- V. **Method**: How will you answer your question? Why is that the best way to do it? In this section, you draw on the methods learned in Qualitative or Quantitative Methods to explain how you'll go about answering your Research Questions. This should be somewhat detailed, including how you'll sample the material chosen (in the case of texts for qualitative textual analysis or quantitative content analysis), how you'll find people (in the case of ethnography, focus groups, survey research, experiments, or other methods that involve human participants), how you'll devise questions, etc. Once you find the material or participants, what, specifically, will you do with them? It's a good idea to look at published studies and other theses for models.
- VI. **Outline of Findings**: Even if you haven't collected data or analyzed it yet, try to envision what chapters you'll divide the rest of the project into, writing a sentence or two on each. These will probably change, but writing them down now will give you a starting point later on and will help you communicate your plans to the committee.

### The Completed Thesis

In most cases, your proposal will become the first few chapters of your thesis. The remainder of the project will consist of the chapters written from the research you carry out. These are cumulatively called the **Findings** or **Results**, although many thesis writers, especially qualitative ones, use chapters titles specific to content. At the end, you will write a **Discussion** and/or **Conclusion**.

In a qualitative thesis the **Findings** section explains your research in detail, analyzes what you have done using your chosen theories and methods, and discusses

what you have found as an answer to your research questions. The Findings should comprise the bulk of your thesis--at least half of the total length, or preferably about two-thirds, although this varies from thesis to thesis. It is usually divided into topical chapters. Your findings and discussion sections should answer your research questions, bringing in relevant theory and literature to demonstrate the significance of your findings.

In a quantitative thesis the **Results** section provides a detailed account of the outcomes of the statistical tests conducted on the data obtained through the processes described in the Methods section. The results section is usually a relatively brief section of the thesis as compared to the introduction, but it will be the end product of a substantial amount of work on your part in terms of analysis. In many ways the most important part of your thesis as it represents your work's unique contribution to the body of knowledge in the field.

The main text of quantitative theses typically end with a **Discussion** section. The Discussion begins by briefly (usually in a paragraph) summarizing what was known prior to your study, what you did, and what you found. It should also cover the strengths and, more importantly, the limitations of your research. The implications of your study for future research in your area of interest should be examined, including opportunities for future research that your work and thought have identified.

In the **Conclusion** of a qualitative thesis, you will summarize your project and findings, stating the limitations of your research and suggest some ideas for future research in this area. You should not introduce new findings or bring in new discussion in this chapter. Your purpose here is to tie everything together. In quantitative theses, conclusions are typically a brief, single paragraph at the end of the discussion, if they are present at all. However, please remember that these are general guidelines, and will vary somewhat depending on individual projects.

A thesis should also have a **Bibliography or References** section, depending on which citation style you use. Be consistent with your citations and make sure that you haven't omitted any sources in your reference section. There are many online guides for both the APA and Chicago citation styles online.

### **Stylistic Guidelines**

Before it is filed with the Graduate College, a thesis must conform to the formatting required by the university, since copies are bound in book form, including the appropriate **title pages** and a **table of contents**

For a MTSU Thesis formatting checklist, go to <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~graduate/pdf/ThesisDissChecklist.pdf>

Be sure to

- Insert page numbers on all drafts of your proposal and thesis.
- Be consistent with headings.
- Proofread more than once.

- Remember that your thesis will be filed in the MTSU library and may be consulted by other scholars in years to come, so make it your very best work

### **Other Considerations:**

**Plagiarism:** MTSU defines plagiarism as “The adoption or reproduction of ideas, words, statements, images, or works of another person as one’s own without proper acknowledgment” (*Student Rights and Responsibilities*, p. 8; online at <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~handbook/rights.pdf>). It should go without saying that your work, especially on a project as important as a master’s thesis, should be your own. While you may want to look at other students’ theses as models, you should of course take care not to adopt their exact language. As with other work at the university, cases of possible plagiarism will be taken to the appropriate university authorities for disciplinary action, which may jeopardize a student’s degree. Remember: Cite your sources when you use other people’s ideas, and quote and cite sources when you use other people’s words. If you think that the use of other material might present ethical problems, it is always a better idea to discuss the situation with your advisor *before* presenting the work as your own than risk plagiarism.

**Time:** Students who are the most successful at writing a thesis in a timely manner are those who choose a topic they care about, take charge of the project, and work well independently. Be honest with yourself about how much time you have to devote to the thesis and plan accordingly. This varies from student to student and depends on other commitments. A student whose main focus is the thesis and who works at it consistently can probably finish in two semesters. Some projects take longer. Remember that *Perfectionism is the arch-enemy of Done*. All of us who do research and write have to go through multiple revisions of our work. Understanding that at the outset and factoring in time for feedback and revisions will make the process go more smoothly. But when it’s all done, you not only have a degree--you have a piece of work that you can be proud of.