

School of Communication and the Arts
Department of Strategic Communication and Journalism

Guidelines for Writing an M.A. Thesis

I. Introduction

The M.A. thesis is a scholarly document that is based on original research that functions as the culminating experience for masters' degree students enrolled in the M.A. in Communication or M.A. in Journalism programs who choose the thesis option (COM 699 or JRN 699) instead of the directed project option (COM 696 or JRN 696). Below are some common questions and answers about the M.A. thesis.

Which culminating experience option should you choose?

If you plan to one day pursue a Ph.D. Degree, we highly recommend choosing the M.A. thesis option. It will be advantageous to you when applying for doctoral programs. If, however, you seek a career as a communication professional or journalist and you have no plans to seek a Ph.D., then we recommend the directed project option.

When do I enroll in COM 699 or JRN 699?

The masters' thesis is a culminating experience, meaning it is the last degree requirement that you should enroll in AFTER all your other course requirements have been completed. There are some exceptions for longer thesis projects and for students who begin their programs in the summer or spring, but no student will be allowed to enroll in COM 699 and JRN 699 until the final year of their degree program, and usually, the final semester of their program. You can enroll in COM 699 or JRN 699 in the fall semester, spring semester, or first summer session. You will have two complete semesters to finish your thesis. If you have not finished after two semesters you will have to enroll again in COM 699 or JRN 699 for additional credit hours.

When can I expect faculty to be available when I need assistance?

Faculty are available to contact throughout the year except when travelling overseas or on vacation. January through mid-June are the best months to work with faculty on your thesis. Late June through mid-August are the weeks when faculty are most likely to be traveling or on vacation. If you plan on working on your thesis throughout the summer months, find out the availability of your chair before the end of the spring semester.

How long will it take to complete my M.A. thesis?

It will usually take one semester, although students have the option to take a longer period of time. Students will be given a grade of IP (in progress) at the end of the first semester

of enrollment until they defend their M.A. thesis before their thesis committee during the following semester. After a successful defense, students will receive a passing grade (P). An unsuccessful defense, which is extremely rare, will receive a NP grade (no pass) but in such cases the student will have the opportunity to re-enroll in a culminating experience thesis or directed project to complete the requirements for the M.A. degree. Almost all students complete their M.A. thesis in a 3-6 month period. If your thesis project takes more than six months to complete, as noted earlier, you will be required to re-enroll in COM 699 or JRN 699 for 3 cr/hrs one more time until their thesis defense. Students who fail to successfully defend their thesis also will be required to enroll for a second time in either COM699/JRN 699 or alternately in COM 696/JRN 696.

How do I choose a thesis committee?

Your M.A. thesis committee will consist of a thesis committee chair and a second member from the faculty in the School of Communication and the Arts. The student chooses his or her committee members with approval of the Associate Dean. A student can request to have a third committee member who has an earned Ph.D. degree or an M.A./M.F.A. degree with more than five years of professional experience, with approval from the Associate Dean.

How do I defend my M.A. thesis?

Once you have completed your M.A. thesis to the satisfaction of your thesis chair, your chair will arrange a 2-hour thesis defense. During the defense, you will be given the opportunity to present your research findings to your thesis committee and your committee will ask questions and engage in an academic dialogue with you about your project. The committee will then decide if your thesis project satisfies the academic rigor expected of a masters' degree thesis and grant you a pass/no pass. As stated previously, it is with rare exception that a student does not pass an oral defense. However, it is quite common for a student to pass the oral defense and still be required by the thesis commit to revise his or her thesis before submitting it to a proofreader.

How do I find a proofreader?

The School of Communication and the Arts has a list of approved proof readers and their standard fees for proof-reading your completed thesis. Each student is responsible for hiring and paying for the proof-reading or their manuscript. After your M.A. thesis is proof-read, it is then submitted to the Regent University library. Instructions and a list of proofreaders can be found on the SCA website.

How do I begin?

You begin the M.A. thesis process by writing and defending a thesis proposal. If you have already begun this process, use these guidelines to refine your proposal.

II. Preparing a Thesis Proposal

Once you form your M.A. thesis committee, your thesis chair will guide you as you write your thesis proposal. The proposal is essentially the first three chapters of your thesis: an introduction chapter, a review of literature chapter, and a methodology chapter. Once your proposal is completed to the satisfaction of your thesis chair, your chair will arrange for a thesis proposal defense. The purpose of the defense is to make sure that your thesis project is appropriate for fulfilling the academic standards expected of a masters' thesis. The thesis defense will also ensure that: (1) your thesis topic addresses a specific area of communication study, (2) an organized plan is in place for collecting or obtaining data to address the research questions and/or hypotheses posed in your thesis, and (3) your methods of data analysis or historical-critical analysis are appropriate to the data set or historical artifacts analyzed.

How long should the thesis proposal be?

There are no specific page number requirements for the length of a masters' thesis proposal. Generally, students should expect to write a 10-15 page introductory chapter, a 15-25 page literature review, and an 8-12 page methods chapter. The page lengths of proposals will vary according to the nature of the thesis project. Provided below are guidelines for writing each chapter.

A. Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of the introduction chapter is to explain purpose of the thesis, the research objectives of your study, the rationale for your work, the scope of your work, the context of your study, the concepts and variables that you will deal with in your study, the theoretical framework of your study, and how you expect your work to make a useful contribution to the scholarly community.

We often ask our M.A. thesis students to complete the following sentence: "The purpose of my thesis is to ...". This has been a very useful exercise in helping students to narrow their focus on something that is doable in a single masters' thesis given the timeframe they have to work. Most students begin with a project either much too broad or not very relevant to the academic community. By articulating a single-sentence purpose statement we are able to help students zero in on the heart of their thesis study so they can better assess the feasibility and relevance of their study. We prefer to have students include a purpose statement within the first few pages of their thesis.

Closely related to the purpose of your thesis are the study objectives. These could be articulated as more specific research questions or more generally as goals that you hope to accomplish. Research objectives state the specific outcomes that you hope to achieve after your project is completed.

A third important goal of the first chapter of a thesis proposal is a discussion of the rationale for your study. Why should anyone care about your thesis? What will your study contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding your topic area? What are the theoretical implications of your thesis work? How do you anticipate that your thesis will create new knowledge or extend or reaffirm existing knowledge? Answering these "who cares" questions will help you to establish the relevance of your work.

Fourth, your introduction chapter should describe the scope of your study. What are the parameters or boundaries around your inquiry? What ideas, concepts, and variables are within the

confines of your study and what lie outside of your study? Each thesis study needs boundaries to delineate what will be studied and what will not be studied.

A fifth part of the introduction chapter is to explain the context of the study. You should provide a brief history regarding the object of your thesis project, whether that be a media production, a person, an organization, a campaign, a specific audience, or an artifact or process that is the focus of your study. You should explain to your readers everything they need to know about the object of study.

Next, you should discuss the theoretical framework of your study in the introduction chapter. What theories will you draw from to help guide your study? Will you be using theory to make predictions, will you be using theory as possible sources of interpreting your findings, or will you be taking a grounded theory approach in which you have no pre-conceived explanations of the phenomenon you are studying, but instead, hope that theoretical explanations might emerge from your data?

Finally, your introduction should discuss how you expect your thesis will make a useful contribution to the scholarly community. What do you hope to achieve to increase understanding of the phenomenon that you are studying? What do you anticipate that the implications of your study could be? What will your readers learn after reading your thesis?

In summary, your introduction should explain in detail what your study is about, why it is important, and what it will produce. The first chapter of your masters' thesis should answer many questions about the nature of your study. By the end of the chapter, every reader should understand exactly what you intend to do, why you are doing it, and what you hope the contributions of your study will be. Most first chapters of a masters' thesis are about 10-15 pages (double-space, 12-pt font, standard one-inch margins). There is no optimum length to the first chapter of a thesis proposal since each thesis is unique. Some social science thesis introduction chapters are considerably shorter and some humanities theses may have much longer first chapters. Ask your thesis chair if he or she has any models of past masters' degree theses that you can read that represent a good first chapter of a thesis similar to the type of study you are conducting.

B. Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The second chapter of M.A. thesis proposal is the review of literature. Reviewing the literature of a particular subject matter is like entering a conversation. Before you can intelligently contribute to an ongoing conversation among a group of communication scholars, you first must listen carefully to what they are talking about. You accomplish this by reading and synthesizing what they have written.

Whatever subject you are studying, there is ongoing academic literature about that subject that helps you understand what they are discussing. When you read academic literature, there are at least six different kinds of information that should be created as a result of your reading. A good review of a scholarly work should generate: (1) a discussion of the author(s)' study or analysis objectives, (2) an explanation of the theoretical approach or framework used for the study or written analysis, (3) an explanation of the methodology, research or writing approach used by the author(s), (4) a summary of the author(s)' major findings and conclusions, (5) a critique on the quality and merits of the written work and evaluation of whether or not the author(s) achieved their objectives, and (6) a recommendation on what further scholarly study or analysis should be pursued. Producing these six outcomes will obviously require more than a

short summary of the work, but rather a careful reading and focused thinking about the work, and multiple paragraphs of review and analysis. Although this will obviously take more time than simply summarizing an article, it will provide you with the kind of information needed to create a good literature review.

By the end of your literature review, your readers should have a good understanding about what is known and what is not known about the topic area of your inquiry. In this way you can set up your own research questions and/or hypotheses into the unknown areas of inquiry that you choose to study.

One of the decisions you will need to make is what theories you intend to discuss in your literature review. A common mistake by masters' degree students is including long reviews of theories in the literature review that are never referred to again in their thesis. As much as possible, the theories discussed in the literature review should be used to frame your thesis study and should be discussed in the final chapter of your thesis.

Learning how to write academically is usually not easy but is a skill that can be developed. You will become a good academic writer by reading academic work and by writing your own academic papers. There is no substitute for academic writing experience, which involves receiving critiques from others and re-writing. Your thesis chair will help provide this kind of feedback. Realizing that re-writing is an important part of the masters' thesis process will prepare you for developing an academic style that will help you complete your literature review successfully. If you study the literature reviews of published academic articles in high quality academic journals (articles are accepted through a blind review process) you will find many good examples of academic writing that you can follow.

C. Chapter 3: Methodology

The third chapter of your masters' thesis proposal is your methodology chapter. In this chapter you need to describe in detail exactly how you intend to carry out your study. First, you should describe the nature of your study. If you are conducting historical-critical research, you should describe in detail the nature of the artifact(s) that you are examining. This description should include a discussion of the origin of the artifact(s), an explanation of how each artifact was created, and a thorough consideration of the important history of the artifact(s).

In qualitative and quantitative studies, the focus of research is usually not an artifact but rather a set of individuals, a group of people, or an organization. Thus a thorough description of the people in your study must be provided. Who is the sample of respondents in your study? How were they selected to participate? What was the non-response rate of those who were asked to participate who declined? What are the demographic characteristics of your sample or study participants? If you are conducting in-depth interviews, then a short description of each participant is appropriate. Fictitious names can be used if your respondents wish to remain anonymous.

If you collected data online, common now in survey research, then a detailed description of how the online sample was obtained should be provided in the methods chapter. Some students now access pools of respondents through professional research companies. In these cases thesis students should provide details about the nature of these research pools, how they are empaneled by research companies, and what compensation they are given. More often than not, students simply fail to provide enough detail about what they plan to do to conduct their

research. You should explain your methodology with such detail that a reader can easily understand what you did and how you did it.

If you are conducting a historical critical study, your methodology chapter should explain the type of historical-critical analysis that you are using to carry out your study. You still need to provide a narrative of exactly how you plan to conduct your study, but instead of explaining the quantitative or qualitative methodologies that you would use, you must explain the historical or critical approach that you plan to take and you should provide examples to explain how your approach has been used by other scholars.

We have noticed that in many previous thesis proposals of historical-critical studies that students have provided very little understanding and the conceptual framework that they intended to apply toward understanding their phenomena. If you are using a more interpretive research approach, you then must explain in detail how the interpretive approach will be implemented and how it will guide your decision making throughout the research process.

Variables of Interest. Regardless of the type of methodology you plan to employ, you need to describe in detail the variables that you will be exploring. Although the word *variable* is most often associated with social science research, it simply refers to any factor, trait, condition, meaning or outcome that can vary in any way. Even historical-critical studies examine differences among things that vary. Whatever the important variables are that you are seeking to study should be described in detail in the methodology chapter. Each variable of interest should be clearly defined in the first chapter of your thesis proposal.

Analysis and Measurement. Once you have described your variables, you need to explain how they will be analyzed, interpreted or measured. If you are conducting a historical-critical study, you should describe the particular theoretical framework or model that you will use to study the phenomenon or artifact on which you are focusing. In qualitative studies, you should describe the qualitative approach you are using to guide the interpretation of your qualitative data. In quantitative studies, you should explain the research instruments that you plan to use to measure your variables. If you construct a research instrument such as a survey questionnaire, an in-depth interview guide, or a focus group moderator guide, explain the instrument in detail and provide a copy of the instrument in an appendix of your thesis. Make sure that you clearly describe how your various variables will be assessed.

Procedure. Every study should provide a description of the procedure used to conduct the study. One of the important characteristics of social science research is reproducibility. Is your study described in such detail that someone could reproduce it? Reproducing a study does not imply that another researcher would produce the same findings as you or have the same conclusions. It simply means someone can come after you and could reconstruct your study based on your detailed description of your procedure.

A good thesis proposal will explain exactly how each variable is being measured so that other scholars could replicate their study. Although not all research is replicable, researchers should provide as much detail as possible explaining exactly what they did and how they did it.

Statistical Tests. If you are conducting a quantitative thesis study, you should explain the statistical tests that you plan to use to analyze your data. This requires careful attention to matching the appropriate statistics needed to answer each research question and/or test each

research hypothesis. If you do not prescribe the appropriate statistical test for the kind of data that you will obtain, this will become embarrassingly obvious. Make sure that you thoroughly understand what your data will look like before writing this section. When you provide such details your thesis chair will help you to assess if the statistics you propose match the kind of data that you will gather.

In conclusion, the methods chapter of your thesis proposal should explain exactly how you plan to measure each variable in your study. This is a much easier process in a quantitative study. If you are conducting qualitative research, you should still describe in detail each variable of interest and then explain your interpretive approach in how you plan to assess each variable. In a historical-critical study, you will explain your variables of interest and how you will apply an appropriate rhetorical and/or interpretive methodology to study those variables.

III. The Structure of a Thesis Proposal

Your thesis proposal should have the following elements in this order.

- Title page
- Abstract
- Table of contents
- Introduction chapter
- Thesis statement in introduction chapter
- Review of literature chapter
- Research questions and/or hypotheses at the end of the literature review
- Methodology chapter
- Copy of each research instrument used
- List of references

Provided below is a brief description of these elements/

Title page

- Template is provided by the School of Communication & the Arts

Abstract

- the abstract is a brief summary of your thesis proposal
- its length should not exceed ~ 150 words
- present a brief introduction to the issue
- make the key statement of your thesis
- give a summary of how you want to address the issue
- include a possible implication of your work, if successfully completed

Table of contents

- list all headings and subheadings with page numbers

- indent subheadings

Introduction chapter (already explained in detail)

Thesis statement

- In a couple of sentences, state your thesis.
- The thesis statement should capture the essence of your intended project and also help to put boundaries around it.

Review of literature chapter (already explained in detail)

Research questions and/or hypotheses

- A research question is stated in the form of a question and is used when you are not sure what outcome to expect.
- A hypothesis is used when there is a clear expectation based on existing theory and research of how one variable is related to another variable. Each hypothesis must have at least two variables and must state a positive or negative relationship between two or more variables.
- The research questions and hypotheses should never overlap or be the subject of the same variables. Instead, they should complement one another and each provide unique information.

Methodology chapter (already explained in detail)

Copy of research instrument(s)

- Explain clearly in the methodology chapter.
- Provide a copy of each instrument in the appendix.

List of references

- Cite all ideas, concepts, text, data that are not your own.
- If you make statements of fact or assertions, support them with your own data or a reference.
- All references cited in the text must be listed in the references.
- Follow the APA Manual, 6th edition.