

MASTER'S THESIS

Writing a Master's thesis can be a challenging and rewarding way to consolidate and extend the interests and skills a student has developed in the Master's program. The thesis option is open to students in all program options. Before considering the Master's Thesis as a capstone option, the graduate student should carefully assess his or her own performance on major research papers in assigned courses.

The process of writing a thesis is very demanding and can add as much as one to two semesters to the length of a Master's program. Students are admitted to the thesis option by petition only. Petitions are considered by a committee composed of the thesis director, a second reader and the graduate coordinator with the final approval or denial to be determined by the department chair. Petitions must be submitted by the sixth (6th) week of the semester that is at least two full semesters prior to the expected completion date, excluding summer as a term. For example, a student wishing to graduate in the spring semester would be required to submit a petition by the sixth week of the preceding spring semester. The Thesis Petition Committee will meet twice a year as needed in the eighth week of the term so that students whose petitions were not approved will have sufficient time to prepare for the Master's examinations.

Petitions are to be submitted to the graduate administrative assistant and must be composed of the following items:

- Portfolio of three research papers written in graduate seminars.
- Thesis proposal developed in accordance with the Thesis Proposal Guidelines (available in the graduate administrative assistant's office). At a minimum, the proposal must contain the following components:
 - Statement of Topic
 - List of Key Primary Texts
 - Thesis/Research Questions to be addressed
 - Explanation of connections between project and the program option whose goals/outcomes it is meant to meet and extend
 - Theoretical Approach/Resources
 - Preliminary Bibliography of Secondary Sources
 - Outline of Main Chapter
- The names of full-time faculty members who have agreed to serve on the thesis committee if the petition is successful

In addition to assessing the materials submitted by the graduate student and consulting, when appropriate, with the proposed readers, the Thesis Petition Committee will take into account the G.P.A., writing ability, transcripts, and record of incompletes taken by the student when rendering its decision.

Once the student has been approved to enter the thesis capstone option, he or she should follow the procedure below:

- 1. Formation of thesis committee.** The thesis committee will consist of the thesis director, a second reader, and the graduate coordinator.
- 2. Completion of necessary documents.** Once the thesis committee is formed, the student must obtain and complete the appropriate documents. These may be obtained from the graduate administrative assistant. They include the Thesis Planning Form, Thesis Proposal Form, and University Master's Thesis Regulations (GS-11). All university imposed deadlines can be found in this last document.
- 3. Enrollment in Master's Thesis (ENG 6960).** Enrollment in the Master's Thesis course (ENG 6960) is mandated in the semester during which the work begins (two semesters prior to planned completion). The work will be administratively continued (RP through the next semester(s), but the student must enroll in ENG 6990 (Master's Degree Continuation) during the semester in which the thesis is expected to be completed, defended and filed.
- 4. Development of Thesis Schedule.** As soon as the thesis proposal is accepted, the candidate should meet with the thesis director to work out a schedule for submission of each chapter for the director to critique and return for revisions. The various drafts of the thesis (at various stages) should also be submitted to the second reader for feedback and critiques. Please note that the candidate is expected to start working on the thesis as soon as its proposal is accepted, including in the summer.
- 5. Submission and Revision.** A complete thesis draft must be submitted to all three readers by the end of the sixth week of the term. Arrangement to schedule an oral defense with the thesis committee is processed by the graduate coordinator, the student and the graduate administrative assistant. Readers will return the draft with suggestions for revisions at end of the oral defense so that the thesis may be finalized after the oral but before filing, with the approval of the thesis director.

Arrangement to schedule an oral defense with the thesis committee. The thesis oral defense should be scheduled to be held no later than week 13 of the final term (after completion, but before formal filing, of the thesis). A copy of the thesis must be available for reader review at the beginning of the sixth week of the final semester. The thesis oral itself will take the form of a discussion of the thesis between the candidate, the thesis director, the second reader, and the graduate coordinator.

THESIS PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

1. How should I approach writing a thesis proposal?

A. Audience

You are writing to an audience that is mid-way between an audience of specialists and an audience of non-specialists. You should aim to start your proposal by establishing common ground between you and your readers, which will serve as an introduction to your topic you've chosen.

- You can mention a critical position or belief commonly held by readers about the topic, author, or period you are studying.
- You can make a connection between your thesis topic and key issues in present or past cultural, linguistic, historical, anthropological debates in the U.S. or internationally.

- You can explain the relevance of your topic culturally or historically. For example, you can discuss the ethical issues raised by medical progress in the nineteenth century novel and in contemporary American political and literary debates or the role of literature in opening up discussion of the position of the child at the end of the twentieth century in Caribbean novels, etc.

B. Goals

The genre of the thesis proposal relies in part upon the rhetorical strategy of persuasion, i.e. you have to persuade the committee and your readers of the inherent value and significance, and relative freshness of your project.

To persuade others that your project is relevant and exciting, you need to ask yourself why you are interested in it. You need to decide what you are interested in and why and communicate it to others in clear, grammatically correct English. It might be helpful to think about your own personal/intellectual trajectory and to reflect on how you got interested in this topic, when you started thinking about it, what readings/ discussions, etc. triggered this idea/interest, and from what elements (literary, non-literary, philosophical, linguistic, etc.) the ideas started to take shape in your mind or work. Drawing on your seminar papers is often an excellent idea as well.

Remember that your proposal begins from where you are, and with the knowledge that you have acquired prior to and during graduate school. Use your strengths, interests and knowledge to shape this project.

2. What should my thesis proposal accomplish?

Your thesis does not have to be wholly “original.” It simply needs to show that it is configuring or reconfiguring knowledge in a certain way that itself is original. Your goal will be to explain why you are reconfiguring this knowledge in the way you have chosen and to what end. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a) How can I justify my focus on a particular issue in a group of texts?
- b) What justifies the ways I have grouped particular texts or issues?
- c) How can I account for choosing a specific methodological approach to the texts or issues at stake?

Once you have answered these questions and become aware of which elements you are putting together and in which ways, you will probably come up with fresh insights on the subject matter.

In addition, your proposal needs to reflect your ability to organize your material into “bite-size” sections, which will be reflected in the way you structure the work into chapters. This is important on a structural level (to ensure the feasibility of the project) but also on psychological level for both yourself and your readers. If you can package a thesis into organized segments, you are showing your readers that you have realistic objectives. It will also allow you to think of the writing or drafting process as a series of short-term projects, rather than as one infinite, intangible research project. It will allow you to focus on one part at a time.

It is always a good idea to check for dissertations that have already been written on your topic. Consult the “Dissertation” electronic database available online through the Cal Poly Pomona University Library. This database allows you to view dissertation abstracts related to your topic, thus ensuring that you are not duplicating existing work.

3. What should I include in the proposal?

A. Conventions

The length of a thesis proposal will vary, as will the length of an actual thesis. As a general rule, you can plan on writing between 7-15 doubled-space pages for the proposal and about 75-100 pages for the actual thesis.

Your proposal should have a good title, one that is informative but not generic. For example, avoid a title like: “A Postcolonial Perspective on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Other.”

Finally, for theses in literature and rhetoric, be sure to consult the MLA Style Manual (latest edition) and to follow MLA guidelines when formatting your thesis, citing your sources and constituting your bibliography. For TESL, you will use APA Style Manual.

B. Format

Your thesis proposal should read like a structured rationale or defense of your project. It will therefore read like a logical and coherent essay that includes a number of categories to help you and your readers identify the focus and relevance of the project. Keeping your audience and goals in mind as outlined above, use the suggested structure below to organize and write your thesis proposal.

As a general rule, your proposal should clearly explain WHAT, WHY, and HOW. The questions that are included under each category of “**Recommended Structure of Thesis Proposal**” below are intended to help you focus your writing. Be sure to use complete sentences in paragraph form when formulating your answers to these questions. Your answers in the final draft of your proposal should not, in any way, take the form of a bulleted list.

A few things to keep in mind as you start drafting your answers:

The first category, “**Description of Thesis Topic**” should include a statement of your main focus and the questions you will be asking. In other words, you will need to formulate a statement of your hypothesis, which will become by the end of your project, a thesis statement. One way to think of this is to see the hypothesis as a series of questions that can begin from the general and move towards the more specific. For example: Why have critical studies of Canadian women writers never focused on the prevalence of figures of the rebellious teenager in these texts? Has the representation of

adolescence been the focus of critical work in other literary cultural contexts? Do these Canadian novels borrow from the 19th century European genres of the *bildungsroman* or *roman d’education*?, etc.

It is always a good idea to try to formulate potential answers to these questions in your proposal. However, you should not worry too much about giving a highly articulate presentation of your focus.

A simple, schematic presentation at this stage is very acceptable as long as you show your readers and committee that you have thought extensively about the topic at hand and that your project is well-defined and feasible--even if you do not have all the answers yet.

The Fourth Category “**Methodology and Organization**” should include a clear statement of the methodological approaches (conceptual, thematic, theoretical, etc.) that you will be adopting in your thesis.

As you have been reading critical approaches to linguistic, literary, or cultural interpretation, you should be accustomed to classifying the methodological or theoretical approaches valorized by a specific critic: i.e. psychoanalytic criticism, and then what type of psychoanalytic criticism? Feminist criticism and then what type of feminist criticism? Postcolonial criticism, and then what type of postcolonial criticism? Linguistic scholarship, but then what type of linguistic scholarship? A textualist approach, but with what type of critical goals?

You should be able to give a brief explanation of your own methodological or theoretical approaches, but this will require that you do some research in the field: you will need to get a sense for how critics have addressed your subject and which critical approaches they have adopted (which you will then outline by providing a brief overview in the third category of your proposal entitled “**Current Criticism**”). This will help you situate your project and your own questions in a field of critical inquiry.

To decide on the type of critical approach you will adopt and why, consider the following questions: How will my critical tools bring about new syntheses and /or new analyses which will contribute to a better understanding of the topic? Remember also that you may revise or extend existing critical approaches to your topic. Remember also that your project can draw on different theoretical or methodological approaches. But to avoid letting a methodology or critical discourse take over your project, make sure that you have a good idea of what you want your project to accomplish. Ultimately, you want to ensure that your project conveys your own critical voice and you own methodological goals, not some borrowed language that addresses your topic generally.

The last category “**Chapter Overview**” is your chance to show how you plan to organize the argument. How you will break down the project into manageable writing assignments for yourself? Each chapter description will give your committee and readers the following information: what questions will you ask? What texts will you study and with what specific focus? What do you plan on investigating in each chapter? What do you hope to find out?

You can plan on writing about one paragraph for each chapter to describe your plan and goals for the chapter.

Recommended Structure of a Thesis Proposal:

- **Description of Thesis Topic**

What subject matter will my thesis examine?
Which thematics/overarching concepts will organize my discussion?
What questions will my thesis try to answer?
What is my overall argument?

- **Importance of Research to Disciplinary Concerns**

Why is this of interest and/or of significance to me and to others?

- **Current Criticism**

Which types of studies have already been conducted on this subject matter?
How will my project engage with or add to the discussion in this field?

- **Methodology and Organization**

Which texts will I address and study?
Why have I chosen these specific texts?
In what order will I examine them and why?
What methodology or approach will I use to direct my analysis?
What is my rationale for using this type of methodology or approach?

- **Overview of each chapter, including brief introduction and conclusion.**

Note: The number of chapters will depend on the nature and scope of your project. Start with an introduction, perhaps 3 chapters and a conclusion.

- **Working Bibliography**

Note: This should include the works you have read and plan on reading, which can separate into the following two categories:

Primary texts
Secondary Texts

Bibliography of texts to consult for assistance with the preparation of the Proposal:

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*. 1998.
Gibaldi, Joseph, ed. *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*. 1992.
Zerubavel, Eviatar. *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations and Books*. 1999.