

Writing a Thesis

What is the thesis requirement?

Every student in the MA in Data Analytics and Applied Social Research degree program is required to write a Master's thesis. The thesis consists of original, independent research by the student, which culminates in a thesis document or research report. The thesis represents the capstone project of the graduate program and utilizes many of the research skills students are expected to master during their course of study.

The length of the document varies according to the type of data collection and data analysis, but it is expected to be larger than a typical graduate paper. The thesis is generally 25-40 double-spaced pages long and typically resembles a scholarly article in a social science journal, although the format may differ depending upon the kind of research conducted.

During the writing phase of the thesis, students may take Soc 793 Thesis Research. This is a 3-credit course with a facilitator who may be different from your thesis advisor, and it meets regularly. It is highly recommended that all students attend the thesis course in the semester in which they are hoping to complete the thesis. Your advisor will determine your final grade on the thesis.

Students with more ambitious topics may elect to devote an additional course, in the same or in the preceding semester, to thesis writing. In this case, we recommend that they take Soc 791, an independent study course for up to 3 credits. These courses count toward the credits required for graduation. Either or both may be taken during the term or during the summer session. Satisfying the thesis requirement involves filling out the thesis form, with the signature of your thesis advisor or the MA Director. This form then gets filed with the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Registrar's office.

How do I choose a thesis topic?

Any social science topic is fair game for the thesis. However, the thesis is not a dissertation. Rather, it should explore or answer a very focused research question – one that may be examined during the course of one semester or two at most and that may be adequately addressed by available data.

Students develop thesis topics by matching their interests with available data or with data that may be readily collected. Given the nature of the requirement, most students elect to use existing data, rather than to collect their own. Various survey data files from ICPSR (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/>) are available for download, as are numerous public use data files. Much of the data used in graduate courses could also be made available for thesis writing. Often, successful theses have been developed from term papers completed for courses.

Once you identify a potential topic for your thesis, you should conduct some preliminary work to determine the feasibility of your project (conduct some preliminary literature review and investigate possibilities for either data collection or data analysis). Contact the MA program advisor to discuss your ideas and identify a faculty member who could supervise your thesis research.

How do I find a thesis advisor?

In the ideal situation, your thesis advisor will have expertise either about your selected area of research or the methods you plan to use. Your thesis advisor must be a member of the Sociology Department faculty. The default advisor for your thesis is the MA Program Director, unless you identify a different faculty advisor. The MA Program Director can meet with you to facilitate identifying faculty members with expertise related to your thesis. Alternatively, you may elect to work with one of the instructors from your graduate courses. Your choice of thesis advisor should be communicated to the MA Program Director, because your advisor will determine your final grade on the thesis.

Some students require more guidance than others in the research process, while others prefer more independence. It is up to you to negotiate a workable schedule of meetings or communications and deadlines with your thesis advisor.

When is my thesis due?

In order for your thesis to count toward graduation, the grade for the thesis and the signed thesis form must be submitted by the final day to submit grades in a given term or session. Please be considerate and do not expect your advisor to grade your thesis at the very last minute. Advisors should usually see drafts of your thesis on an ongoing basis and have a final draft of the thesis AT LEAST 2-3 weeks ahead of the final grade submission deadline.

How should my thesis be organized?

The thesis should resemble an article for scholarly publication, and we strongly urge you to find a peer-reviewed journal article as model for organizing your thesis. You and your thesis advisor will tailor the format of the thesis to your project. However, in general, theses have the following components:

- Introduction and Background
- Literature Review (or Theory and Hypotheses)
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Bibliography

Introduction and Background

This section introduces your research question and contextualizes its broader significance. Here, you briefly describe the phenomenon or outcome you are studying, what your research question is and why your research is important, and what you intend to do in your paper. This section is generally 1-3 pages.

Theory and Hypotheses

This section reviews research already conducted on your topic and extracts from that literature some hypotheses or expectations about the outcome or phenomena you address in your study. It is meant to set the stage for your own research. Using previous research, you will describe the phenomenon you want to study and what previous research tells us about it. Strategically, this section will build to a justification of the research you plan to do.

It might help to work backwards and start with your research question and then structure this section of the paper so that your research seems like a natural and logical choice given what has and has not been done. The easiest way to do this is to arrange the literature review you have already done, not around individual articles, but around particular points or themes or hypotheses. This usually involves about 20 scholarly, peer-reviewed publications. Often, students find the literature review to be the most challenging portion of the thesis to write. The literature review is usually 4-10 pages long.

Methods

This section explains how you will do the research you propose. What data will you use? What does it contain? What will you be looking for – how will you identify or operationalize the factors you need to study? How will you collect the data (or how were they collected)? And what method will you use to analyze the data and link it to your theoretical expectations. The methods section is usually 3-6 pages long.

Results

In the findings section, you will present the analysis you have done of the data. You have freedom to structure this section, but it should be tightly focused around your research question and your key propositions/ hypotheses. Use examples from published peer-review articles as a guide. In this section, you are exploring or examining what you said you planned to explore or examine in your introduction section, and you are using the methods you said you would use in your methods section. The findings section is usually 5-8 pages long, including tables.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings section brings the different elements of your paper together. In this section, you summarize your results from the findings section, relate these findings back to the literature you reviewed, describe the limitations of your study, and make a broader concluding statement about the importance of your findings. The discussion section is usually 3-5 pages long.

Bibliography

All of the works cited should be referenced in your bibliography. The bibliography must follow a standard format, such as Chicago Style, MLA, or APA.

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