

MA Thesis: Process and Expectations
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Preamble

Devising and executing an MA thesis is challenging and time-consuming. The steps required and articulated below will likely take between 4 and 10 months. They are designed to help streamline the process for you and your committee and, crucially, ensure that you are set for a successful defense.

A cautionary note: the writing of the two- and five-page outlines are often the most intellectually challenging and time-intensive steps in this process. A second cautionary note: you may be asked to repeat steps and revise revisions to ensure you are set to move on.

This document is designed to make clear my expectations and to push you to think systematically as you start work on a thesis. The sooner you start, the better.

Writing an MA Thesis:

Step 1. “Two-Pager”

Your first step is to write a two-page outline of your proposed research project. This document cannot exceed two single-spaced pages (references excluded). It must concisely and clearly outline the foundations of your proposed research. This document is required before I will sign on to supervise a thesis. The ‘two-pager’ must answer the following seven questions:

1. *What is the topic of your proposed research?*
2. *What is the specific empirical puzzle and question(s) you seek to explain and answer?*
3. *What existing accounts or explanations exist in the relevant literature(s)?*
4. *Why do these existing accounts fail to address the puzzle/question sufficiently well?*
5. *What is your proposed answer?*
6. *What literature(s) do you engage with to answer your question(s)?*
7. *What methods and data do you propose to utilize to answer your question(s)?*

Step 2. Revised “Two-Pager”

After receiving feedback from me, you will be asked to revise the two-pager. After revisions and my approval, you can bring your revised two-page outline to prospective committee members to build your committee. You should meet with your committee members in person (or virtually) and receive feedback before expanding the outline. Their feedback should shape the next step.

Step 3. “Five-Pager”

After you have received feedback from me and the rest of your committee on the two-pager, you will expand it into a five page (single spaced) outline of your proposed research (references excluded). The expansion will provide you sufficient space to clearly articulate the following (which should serve as headings in the document):

1. *Introduction (0.5 pages)*
2. *Empirical Puzzle and Research Question (0.5 pages)*
3. *Existing and Alternative Explanations (1 page)*
4. *Answer in Brief (1 page)*
5. *Research Design: Methods and Case Selection (1 page)*
6. *Prospective Findings (1 page)*

After writing the five-pager, you will either be directed to solicit further feedback from the committee or, after approval from me, be invited to expand it into the thesis proposal.

Step 4. Thesis Proposal

Based on feedback on your five-pager you will begin work on thesis proposal. This is time to add specificity, engage with alternative explanations, or refine the research design as requested by the committee.

The proposal should be no more than 25 *double-spaced* pages (references excluded). While the structure of your thesis proposal will vary by project, sections should mirror those outlined in Step 3 and include a proposed timetable to complete the MA thesis.

Once the thesis proposal is approved by your supervisor, you will be asked to share the proposal with the full committee for their approval. It often requires more than one round of revisions to gain approval. So this may be a time-consuming step.

Step 5. Draft Thesis

Once your proposal is approved, you will draft the thesis based on the feedback and guidance provided by the committee. This is when the bulk of your research and writing will take place. This step will likely require regular check-ins and periodic reviews of your progress.

The draft thesis must be no more than 40 *double-spaced* pages (references excluded). The draft thesis will provide some variant of the following sections (as discussed with me):

1. Introduction (1-2 pages)

Introduce your topic and case(s). Explain why this research is interesting and important. ‘Sell’ your project to your readers. Clearly state your research question(s) and your answer in brief (your thesis). Outline the structure of the thesis clearly.

2. Empirical Puzzle and Research Question (1-3 pages)

Provide background to your topic and/or case(s) to situate your study. Make clear what the puzzle is that drives your research – what is surprising or *puzzling*? This is your space to offer sufficient background information to ground your question and defend that the research is indeed important and interesting.

3. Existing and Alternative Explanations (4-8 pages)

Provide a detailed literature review drawing on *relevant* scholarly work. Outline existing and alternative explanations to your own. These exist explicitly or implicitly in the relevant literature(s). Clearly articulate why they do *not* answer your questions sufficiently well. Show the omissions or the ‘gaps’ in the literature that you will fill.

4. Argument in Brief (3-6 pages)

Detail the explanation you seek to advance. Here, you may outline the theoretical foundations of your work and the synergies and complementarities with existing explanations. Articulate your hypotheses or ‘hunches’ and defend the logic that underscores them. In this section you must operationalize key concepts and state the observable implications of your proposed answer.

5. Research Design: Methodology and Case Selection (2-5 pages)

Explain how you will defend your thesis and/or how you will test your hypotheses. This is your research design. You should explain and defend the methods and data you choose to rely upon and, depending on the project, provide justification for the case(s) selected.

6. Findings and Analysis (10-15 pages)

Here you present your analysis and findings in detail. Defend and showcase your argument as clearly as possible throughout. As you explore the case(s), be sure to underscore the observable implications of your answer and approach and the lack of analytical fit of alternative explanations.

7. Conclusions (1-2 pages)

Summarize your findings and how you arrived at them. Underscore the contributions or ‘added value’ of your research. Reflect on the limitations of the study and where you – or others – may take the research in the future. What questions remain unanswered? What questions have arisen from this study? Where might your argument have further relevance or ‘travel’ to?

Step 6. Thesis

After you have received feedback and approval from me *and* your committee members on your draft, you will be asked to revise and produce a final version of the thesis. That version will be defended orally. The final thesis must not exceed 45 double spaced pages (references excluded). You may be asked to highlight the revisions made from draft thesis. I will review the thesis and decide if you have adequately addressed the concerns raised by your full committee. If so, we will schedule an oral defense.

Step 7. Oral Defense

You will sit a two-hour oral defense with the full committee. The defense will require you to succinctly and clearly present your thesis in roughly 15-20 minutes using visual aids (e.g. PowerPoint). During the defense, you will be pushed to do the following: discuss your puzzle and case(s) in detail; defend the novelty and suitability of your approach, your theory, and/or your research design; explain your findings and the evidence you rely upon, and; articulate the added value of your research vis-à-vis existing literature(s).