

Writing a Thesis

Guidelines for Choosing an Advisor, a Topic, and Preparing a Proposal

Note: If you are approved for the thesis stream and plan to apply for OGS, please let Graduate Assistant know as soon as possible. Do not start your OGS application until your status has been changed to the thesis stream. This will ensure that you go into the ‘MA’ applicant pool, not the ‘PhD’ applicant pool.

Choosing an Advisor (aka Supervisor)

- Talk to potential advisors
- Consider those with broad expertise in yours or related areas (experience supervising, publishing)
- Expert in your area can be important but not essential
- Someone you can get along with – may want to talk to them about the process

Choosing a Topic

- Think about subject areas that interest you (generally)
- Think about what is known and unknown about it (literature, gaps, questions)
- Something related to the literature and theory
- Something that has not been widely studied, or has been studied but not in a certain way, with certain data set, or in certain context, etc.
- Think about data sources available, and how you might study the phenomenon
- Think about what is doable with available data and time frame. Keep the scope realistic
- Read more about it, and come up with definable research questions and hypotheses
- Something you can live with and not get too sick of

Entry into the thesis stream requires the development and approval of a preliminary thesis proposal of 2-5 pages and the agreement of an advisor who supports entry into the stream.

THESIS STREAM					
YEAR 1			YEAR 2		
Fall Sept-Dec	Winter Jan-Apr	Summer May-Aug	Fall Sept-Dec	Winter Jan-Apr	Summer May-Aug
-Take 3 courses -Choose advisor -2-5 page preliminary thesis proposal -Submit MA supervisor form	Take 3 courses -Find supervisory committee member in consultation with your advisor	-Thesis Proposal (milestone) -See guidelines in Grad Handbook -Submit thesis proposal form	Thesis writing	Thesis writing (it is possible to defend and complete in this term)	Defend and complete

Thesis

6 courses + thesis proposal (summer term) + thesis (second year in program)

What is a Sociological Thesis?

- An original research project or theoretical take on sociological phenomena.
- An advance in knowledge (new question, new data, new control variables)
- Theses can vary in length, topic, focus, methods, etc. No simple formula
- Can be quite variable in terms of focus, number of research questions, methodology, etc.
- Can be quantitative or qualitative methodology, content/policy analysis, or theoretical

Considerations

- Often the research problem is small and defined in scope, not large. Questions should be delimited, can be very narrow. Don't get bogged down in grand questions
- Look at previous theses during process, can use as a guide – sociology.uwo.ca → Graduate → Find A Past Thesis
- Try to narrow down your research interests: think about what you want to study, and roughly how you want to study it (which methodologies would suit the problem). Think about defining a problem that is “doable”. The one year goes by very quickly
- If you collect your own data (quantitative or qualitative) study you will need an ethics review. For low-risk research, the process takes 3-6 weeks, but for research on vulnerable groups, First Nations, or for more controversial research, the process can take 3 months. Be prepared for this delay.

Activities for the Fall/Winter

- Talk to professors broadly in your area of interest. Choose an advisor with whom you can work. Talk about research ideas
- Provide preliminary thesis proposal (2-5 pages) to your advisor
- **Submit supervisor form and MA Transfer Form**
- Try to read ahead in the winter term and get a head start on your literature review, and refining your topic. Something that you need to make time for. Don't leave it until April. Spend time reading and exploring resources

Preliminary Thesis Proposal (2-5 pages)

- Purpose: To create a basic plan for relevant and ‘doable’ research that is appropriate for a thesis at the MA level and have the plan approved by a professor who is willing to supervise
- Elements: research topic, research methodology, type and source of data, brief overview of timelines
- How: Present a basic outline to your potential advisor so you can have a conversation about your plans. Present your written preliminary proposal to him/her. She/he may approve the proposal ‘as is’ or work with you to create a proposal for a thesis that she/he is willing to supervise

Thesis Proposal (summer term), ‘milestone’ (not graded)

- The thesis proposal is designed to give you an opportunity to work with your advisor to refine your research topic, come up with a research strategy, and construct a plan of attack.
- As part of the process, a supervisory committee member must be named – the expectation in our department is that the supervisory committee member will serve as a “reader,” providing feedback beginning at the proposal stage and throughout the writing process, and will read the thesis in its entirety before preliminary submission of the thesis.
- Review (some not necessarily all of) the literature (and theory) on this topic. This review of the literature should provide you with some research questions, hypotheses, which you should specify. Your questions should be related to the literature and relevant theory – what does the literature suggest you should find when you look at this topic?
- Think about what we know and don't know about the topic.
- By the middle of the summer term (end of June) you should have a completed thesis proposal outlining the main literature in the area, the gap in the literature or theoretical question you seek to address, and how you intend to address this question. Data gathering, initial data analysis, ethics review process, should begin in the summer term.
- The thesis proposal should provide a basis for your introduction and an initial draft of the literature review, and lay the groundwork for your thesis chapters (or your ethics protocol if applicable).

Elements of the Thesis

- Introduction – often written last, it sets the general scene and loosely describes what you are doing – can be quite short.
- Literature Review: Generally the hardest chapter to write – organize the literature thematically, address the studies, but not one by one – must integrate them, and make an argument. Point out, what we know about the phenomenon and what we don't know. Talk about the literature in terms of how it establishes a context for your own research, shapes research questions, etc.
- Methodology – describes what you are going to do clearly, and how you are going to do it. What variables? How operationalize key concepts? What is the nature of the data you are using? What is the nature of the population/sample you are studying? Does your data have any limitations?
- Results – presents the results of your analysis.
- Discuss the results of your analysis. What significance do they have? How do they refer back to the literature? What remains still to be studied? What should future researchers do?
- All of this can vary. Theses take different forms – sometimes 2 literature review chapters, a separate historical chapter, or other contextual chapter. Results can be divided. This is a guideline only.

Steps to Completion

- When your advisor thinks your thesis is ready, she/he forms an examining board (two professors from Sociology, one from another discipline) and sets a date for your thesis defense (aka thesis exam).
- The examining board members receive the thesis about a month before the defense date. They read the thesis and provide an evaluation, indicating whether the thesis is acceptable and ready for defense.
- Thesis defense – at the defense, the examining board members ask you questions about your thesis. You may have to defend your choice of theory, methodology, the interpretation of your findings, its relationship to the literature, etc. By this point you are such an expert, that this should go smoothly.