

M.A. Thesis Guidelines
Department of Sociology
University of Houston
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Your Sociology MA thesis is an original research project that requires you to engage with past theories and research; articulate research questions; collect and analyze data to address your research questions; and report and interpret research findings. When complete, your thesis (including references, but excluding appendices) should be approximately 45-65 pages (maximum 85 pages).

Title Page

Use the title page template provided by the University of Houston that is available from the graduate faculty advisor and on the CLASS website.

Abstract

Your abstract is a summary of your research. It should be about 250 words in length, and it should orient the reader to the major findings of your study. It should briefly review your research questions and method(s). Finally, your abstract should identify the thesis' contribution to the discipline and/or society by describing its relevant theoretical, empirical, and/or policy implications.

Introduction

Your introduction should situate your research by answering the following questions:

- (1) *What theoretical or social problem does your thesis address?*
- (2) *How will you go about examining this problem?*
- (3) *Why is studying this problem important?*
- (4) *What are the primary contributions of your research to the existing body of research on this topic? Summarize how your research differs from prior studies, e.g. studying a new population, using different measures, etc.*
- (5) *What will the rest of the thesis reveal?*

Answering these questions means that your introduction will identify your research problem, goals, and questions, as well as show why your project is important. It will also provide a roadmap of the entire thesis, including a brief summary of the major theories and bodies of empirical research that inform your study, an overview of your methods, and a brief summary of your findings.

Literature Review/Theory

Your literature review will call on prior research findings to motivate and situate your research. As such, it will answer two questions:

- (1) *How do prior theories and research findings guide and inform your research?*
- (2) *How does your research build on extant knowledge (i.e. What are the gaps in the literature that your research seeks to fill? How does your research reapply, reimagine, or rework existing research?)?*

The literature review is not simply a summary of past research. Rather, it is a forum for developing your argument within the context of what social science already knows. This will

involve identifying key theoretical debates and arguments, along with bodies of empirical research that inform your research project. If developing quantitative hypotheses, you should use the literature to build your hypothesis. For qualitative research, you might consider articulating some anticipated findings.

Methods

Your methods section will explicate how you conducted your research. A well-written methods section will make replication possible and it will require that you answer these questions, if applicable to your study:

- (1) *Is(are) your method(s) appropriate for your research questions?* Different methods have different strengths and weaknesses, so not all methods are appropriate for all research questions. Consequently, your methods section should defend your research strategy in light of your research questions. It should also justify all major methodological choices.
- (2) *Who or what are you studying?* Identify your population and who/what is in your sample, along with the times and places of data collection. If secondary data are being used, describe the data source and who is included within the sample.
- (3) *How did you collect your data?* Describe how you recruited/collected your sample (including your specific sampling strategy, e.g., purposive sample) and your sample size. Describe the key components of your research instruments (e.g., survey questionnaire, interview guide, content analysis code sheet), including (if relevant) how long it took participants to complete the instrument. For quantitative research, describe your key variables and how you conceptualized and operationalized them. If you are using secondary data, you should describe the structure of the dataset.
- (4) *What are the ethical considerations of your project?* Describe the major ethical issues with your project such as obtaining informed consent, participant anonymity or confidentiality, and minimizing harm (e.g., psychological, physical, or social harm) to your participants.
- (5) *How have you ensured the validity and reliability of your data and results?* Address how you ensure your quantitative measures have produced accurate and consistent data. For qualitative research, consider how your findings and conclusions might be wrong. Examine and address any threats to validity, including how researcher positionality impacts validity.
- (6) *How will you analyze your data?* Describe your analytical strategy. For qualitative research, considerations include how you transcribed, coded, and analyzed your data (e.g., thematic analysis, a grounded theory analysis, etc.). For quantitative research, briefly describe your statistical models (e.g., Chi-square tests, ANOVA, logistic regression, etc.).

Findings/Results

Your research findings should follow from your research questions. This means that you should restrict your findings to those that answer the questions you ask. Your findings/results section should be oriented around one question: *What did you find?* You should begin by describing the key characteristics of your sample. For quantitative studies, this often means presenting a table of descriptive statistics. You will have a lot of data and it is not necessary to report every finding. Revisit your research questions and address each sequentially. Show how you address each

question and what you found. Relate your findings to your hypotheses (or predictions). Ensure that you properly label all tables, charts, diagrams, maps, etc., (e.g., table 1, figure 3, etc.) and walk your reader through this information. For qualitative data, be sure to tell a story with your data. You should not just string quotes together, but show what the quotes illustrate. Set up quotes by identifying the participant's pseudonym and key demographic information without compromising identity (e.g., Stephanie, age 36, teacher). Consider paraphrasing participants' responses.

Discussion and Conclusion

After you have presented your results, you should discuss why they are important. These questions should motivate that discussion:

- (1) *How do you make sense of what you found?*
- (2) *How do your findings relate to the extant theories and empirical research described in your literature review?*
- (3) *If applicable, how do your findings contribute toward the development of new theory?*
- (4) *What are some limitations of your research?*
- (5) *How might others build off of your research?*
- (6) *What are the (theoretical, empirical, and/or policy) implications of your findings?*

Essentially this section should summarize your main findings and then interpret them in light of the extant literature. It should also highlight your contribution to the literature, while also recognizing any limitations of your study. This, in part, involves anticipating and countering any possible alternative explanations. Finally, in this section you should suggest directions for future research and articulate the theoretical, empirical, and/or policy implications of your study.

References

Include a list of all sources cited in the thesis. Use ASA formatting for both in-text citations and references.

Appendix

Include your research instruments, as well as any recruitment materials (letters and advertisements).

Formatting

Use Times New Roman, 12-point font. Double-space and number your pages (center, bottom), starting with the first page of your introduction. Follow the formatting recommendations of the *ASA Style Guide* and as indicated in the guidelines available on the CLASS website.

Tips

Time Management: Plan ahead and remember that things always take longer than you think they will take. Be realistic when you begin your project. It is better to do a smaller project well than to do a larger project poorly. Meet regularly with your thesis Chair and allow ample time for your Chair and committee members to read your work.

Keep in mind that the first draft that you submit to your Chair will undergo many revisions; this means that you cannot submit a first draft shortly before you plan to defend the thesis. You must

allow sufficient time for you and your Chair to process multiple drafts prior to submitting the final version to your other committee members.

Create a timeline that states both short and long terms goals. Try to work every day. Refer to the general timeline (departmental and university) given to you by your graduate faculty advisor during the beginning of term meetings. You should be in regular contact with your Chair to discuss your progress and communicate any unexpected obstacles that arise. Be mindful that delays could affect your timely completion of the program.

Writing: Make an outline before you begin writing. Remember that writing is a process that involves constant revision. Think of the thesis in small parts; it will seem less daunting this way. It is acceptable to jump around when you write your thesis, e.g., write your methods section first and introduction last. Keep in mind your audience and explain key terms. Avoid passive voice as well as emotive and normative statements. Cite sources when appropriate and limit direct quotes from reference materials.

Finally, remember that all drafts submitted to your Chair should already be edited for spelling and grammatical errors either by you or by someone else; these drafts should be in what you feel is a “final” format, rather than your first, unedited draft.

Recommended Readings

- American Sociological Association. 2014. *American Sociological Association Style Guide*. 5ed. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- Becker, Howard S. 2007. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. 2ed. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bolker, Joan. 1998. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. New York, NY: Owl Books.
- Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. 2008. *The Craft of Research*. 3ed. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University. 2009. *A Guide to Writing a Senior Thesis in Sociology*. Boston: Harvard University.
- Furseth, Inger and Eurus Larry Everett. 2013. *Doing your Master's Dissertation*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Massengill, Rebekah P. 2012. *Writing Sociology: A Guide for Junior Papers and Senior Theses*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Maxwell, Joseph A. 2013. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. 3ed. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. April 1979. *The Belmont Report*. Washington, DC: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
- Ragin, Charles, Joane Nagel, and Patricia White. 2004. *Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research*. Washington, DC: National Science Foundation.

Recommended Resources:

University of Houston Writing Center: <http://www.uh.edu/writecen/>