

Doctoral Guidelines for Preparing a Proposal and Thesis

The information contained in this guide is intended to complement related information in the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies General Regulations which is available on the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Web site. While accurate at the time of writing, the information provided here is subject to change.



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1. GENERAL INFORMATION

- 1.1 Goal of the Thesis**
- 1.2 Objectives of the Thesis**
- 1.3 Format of the Thesis**
- 1.4 The Supervisor**

1.1. Goal of the Thesis:

The University of Ottawa define a thesis as follows:

Thesis

A thesis is a significant original body of work produced by a student during his or her studies at the University. A good thesis is thoroughly researched, demonstrates rigorous critical thinking and analysis, presents a detailed methodology and accurate results, and includes tenacious verification of knowledge claims. ... A doctoral thesis must make a significant contribution to knowledge in a field of study, embody the results of original investigation and analysis, and be of such quality as to merit publication.

The overall goal is to conduct a scholarly investigation, under the supervision of a Faculty member, on an issue that is relevant to the content of the PhD program.

1.2. Objectives of the Thesis

- To construct a detailed plan of a research project.
- To review literature relevant to the selected topic.
- To identify and formulate appropriate research questions.
- To select and justify an appropriate research design.
- To select and employ suitable methods or techniques to investigate the problem.
- To analyse relevant data.
- In some cases, to advance, clarify, and/or reframe relevant theoretical questions.
- To write a report covering a review of the relevant literature, the research questions, an explanation and justification of the research conducted, and a discussion of the findings in relation to the background literature.

1.3. Format of the Thesis

Theses submitted for the PhD in Communication should approximately 65,000–100,000 words in length (i.e. 250–400 pages, excluding bibliographic references and any appendices which provide supporting information). Note that this is merely a guideline: theses will vary in length as a function of method, analysis, etc.

1.4. The Supervisor

The role of the supervisor is to advise PhD candidates on all aspects of the research project including:

- The topic area and relevant literature.
- The feasibility of the proposed research.
- The specification of research questions.
- The time scale of the research.
- The design and adequacy of methods, sources of data, and access to fields of observation.
- The analysis and interpretation of results and, when applicable, assisting with the ethics approval process.
- In some cases, where applicable, the focus on the theoretical argument and its relation to and implications for the theoretical literature on which it draws.
- The structure and style of the thesis or research paper.

Note: *It is the student's responsibility to make initial contact with his/her supervisor and to attend all subsequent agreed upon meetings.*

2. GUIDELINES FOR WRITING THE THESIS PROPOSAL

2.1 General Guidelines

2.2 Structure/Content of the Thesis Proposal

2.3 Committees and Deadlines

2.1 General Guidelines

Students are required to submit and defend a **research proposal** before formally starting the research for their thesis.

The process of writing a thesis is one of investigation and discovery. A research proposal can be considered a 'road map' in which one outlines the steps that will be taken during the execution of one's research project. The proposal should locate the project within the major theoretical tradition that informs the work and outline the major substantive research findings in the field. The key is to review the assumptions and claims others have made about the research domain to be investigated and to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these assessments as well as the reasons underpinning one's position. The main issue to bear in mind is that one is trying to 'locate' one's central research question within a broader intellectual context, and **not to reproduce all the work previously done in the area**. By writing a PhD thesis, a student is making the claim that s/he has something to say. S/he must present some foundation, perspective, and evidence upon which to advance the understanding of the issue(s) being investigated.

Given that the proposal is the initial statement of one's research project, it normally begins with a brief, concise, and clear statement of the central research question. The latter can be thought of as a 'puzzle' or problem one is attempting to resolve. At the proposal stage, one is not expected to have the answer or solution – the problem will be investigated during the research. The proposal should address the expected results and, most importantly, the methodological steps that will be taken throughout the research process. That said, one should specify a "working thesis" – i.e. tentative answer or line of reasoning.

2.2 Structure/Content of the Thesis Proposal

Format

The thesis and research paper proposal should:

- Not exceed 7,500 words (i.e. about 30 pages) in length (excluding cover page, abstract, table of contents, bibliography, and appendices). It is imperative to abide by these requirements as the proposal is also an exercise in concision.
- Be double-spaced.
- Be typed, using *Times New Roman* 12 point font.
- Be properly referenced using the APA referencing format (see page 16).

Cover page

- Thesis / research paper title.
- Student name, student number.

- Date.
- Keywords: 2 on concepts, 2 on methods, 1 on the field of observation.
- Department, University.

Abstract (150 words)

The abstract for a research proposal typically provides the following information:

- What is the subject/topic/issue at hand?
- What is the conceptual/theoretical framework guiding the study and the central research problem/question?
- What are the proposed methodology and research techniques to be employed (thesis dependent)?
- What are the expected/anticipated finding(s) and their implications?

Table of Contents (Note: Page lengths for each section will vary by topic, methodology, etc.)

Introduction

Statement of:

- context/rationale for the proposed study;
- central research problem; and
- research objectives.

Literature review

The primary aim of this section is to provide evidence that you understand the broader issues associated with the topic selected. The text should be presented in an essay format. In this part of the research proposal, it is important to define the key concepts that will be used to guide the research, including how they are contested and where they are located within the broad theoretical paradigm in which the project is situated.

In the literature review *you are not stating your opinion.* Instead, the aim is to demonstrate your familiarity with the literature relating to the topic selected through a cohesive argumentation. The structure should be based on an 'inverted triangle' model – i.e. from the general to the specific.

The discussion in the first part of this section should summarize the key points/concepts/ideas/arguments in the relevant literature and the implications of these claims vis-à-vis the topic selected. The types of issues that need to be addressed include:

- What is the argument(s) being made, or the position taken, by various authors writing in the domain to be investigated?
- What assumptions underpin these positions/arguments?
- What is the basis for the arguments presented? (i.e. is it an exercise in pontification or is it based on evidence? If it is based on evidence, what type?); and
- What, if any, are the implications of argument(s) presented? What are the connections with your own research *problématique*?

The discussion in the concluding part of this section should:

- clearly set out the conceptual/theoretical framework to be used for the study; and
- show how the central research question and/or hypotheses to be investigated emerge from the existing literature;

(i.e. Proponents of perspective X claim/argue/assert that In contrast, proponents of perspective Y claim/argue/assert that ... These competing views give rise to question/hypothesis Z).

Note: *The central research question must be clearly stated at the end of the literature review.*

Methodology

In this section, it is important that you:

- establish how the proposed research methodology will not only produce valid data but also facilitate an analysis that will provide congruent answers to the questions posed at the outset;
- address some of the strengths and weaknesses of your approach and to specify what your method tends to reveal that other methods may conceal; and
- identify the sources of information or data that will be used for the study and provide any information you have about the quality or availability of such data.

Note: *It is crucial that the student demonstrates how using the proposed methodology will produce evidence that is related to the “working thesis”.*

If your proposed thesis research involves human subjects (e.g. as interviewees or as participants in a survey or a small group experiment), you must obtain approval from the appropriate ethics board before you will be permitted to begin collecting your data. This is also the case for students who wish to do fieldwork for their theses (see <https://research.uottawa.ca/ethics/reb>).

Conclusion

The research proposal should conclude with a brief discussion outlining why addressing the proposed research problem is important, current, valuable, beneficial, etc. Attention also should be given to how or why the findings contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the domain studied and how they might be applicable.

Thesis or Research Paper Plan

Listing of chapter titles and brief summary (i.e. 3–4 sentences maximum) of chapter content.

Research Timeline

Provide an estimated timetable for completing the work outlined in the proposal. This is not to be considered as a contractual obligation. Rather, it is intended as a reasonable expectation of what is to be accomplished.

The process of applying for ethics clearance may take a fair amount of time. If applicable, students should include this phase in their planning when they prepare their research timetables.

Bibliography/References:

This should include work cited in the proposal *and* other relevant work (both recent and foundational) in the area of study.

2.3 COMMITTEES AND DEADLINES

Committee Composition

Comprehensive exam stage: For the comprehensive exams, the supervisor, in consultation with the student, will select two evaluators, who will also be members of the thesis evaluation committee. (Form: Nomination – Comité d'évaluation_Comp.)

Proposal stage: The supervisor, in consultation with the student, will add one more member to the evaluation committee. This evaluator will be the third member of the committee. (Form: Nomination – Comité d'évaluation_Proposal.)

Thesis stage: The supervisor, in consultation with the student, will choose an external evaluator (from a different department or university) to serve on the evaluation committee. This evaluator will be the fourth member of the committee. (Form: List of examiners/ External Examiner for Doctoral Thesis form.)

All forms explain that the evaluator's signature is mandatory in order to indicate that he or she has agreed to be part of the evaluation committee.

Submission of the proposal for the evaluation:

Students will enrol in the doctoral seminar during the Fall semester of their second year. At the end of the seminar, they will have completed a draft proposal. They will then register for CMN 9997: Thesis proposal in the Winter semester of their second year, in the expectation of submitting their proposal to their committee by April 1. They will defend their proposal within a month of submitting it.

In extraordinary circumstances, if students need to register for CMN 9997 more than once, the deadlines to submit their proposal for evaluation are:

Summer:	August 1
Fall:	December 1
Winter:	April 1

Please note:

1. The student is responsible for the distribution of the proposal.
2. The supervisor is responsible for the proposal defence arrangements.
3. The supervisor is responsible for the submission of the proposal grade by submitting the *Proposition-Proposal* form available at the academic agent's office.

3. GUIDELINES FOR WRITING THE PHD THESIS

3.1 General Guidelines

3.2 Structure/Content of the Thesis

3.3 Deadlines

3.1 General Guidelines

The PhD thesis should reveal that the candidate is able to work in a scholarly manner and has mastered the principal and secondary works published on the subject of the thesis. A PhD thesis must be an original contribution to the advancement of knowledge.

As in other forms of assessment, it is the written text that is evaluated. Regardless of the time and effort that has gone into the research work, ultimately, the assessment stands or falls on the quality of the report submitted and the oral defense. To this extent the **structure** and **clarity** of the dissertation is crucial. There is no one right way to write a thesis because each one is unique and a body of research results is typically multi-faceted, inviting a variety of different interpretations. That said, there are ways and means of writing a good dissertation and/or research paper. The guidelines below represent one of the commonest ways to organize a thesis, but other modes of organization are possible. Candidates should consult with their supervisors to determine the mode that best suits their project.

The following guidelines set out the broad structure and other considerations to be taken into account. Additional information about preparing an PhD thesis or research paper is available on the uOttawa website. See <https://www.uottawa.ca/graduate-studies/students/theses>.

3.2 Structure/Content of the Thesis

For a 65,000–100,000 word PhD thesis (approximately 250–400 pages)

- Font : *Times New Roman 12*.
- Double spaced.
- Properly referenced using the APA referencing format.

Abstract (200–250 words)

The abstract will succinctly summarize the research question(s), the research design and methodology, and the key findings. In the final sentence, the main conclusion of the research should be provided.

The abstract typically is structured as follows:

- Paragraph 1: What is the subject/topic/issue at hand?
- Paragraph 2: What is the conceptual/theoretical framework guiding the study and the central research problem/question (generally stated)?
- Paragraph 3: What methodology has been employed (thesis dependent)?
- Paragraph 4: What are the key finding(s)? – In the sense of pointing out contribution to knowledge *without* using generic words/phrases such as '*provides significant insight*'. Ideally, this paragraph is a ***statement of what specifically is the insight.***

Acknowledgements

Writing a research paper or thesis requires energy, motivation and conviction. It is an endeavour that is seldom achieved alone. Thus, it is common practice in academia to recognize the contribution of people who have, directly or indirectly, helped us achieve our goal. Of course, electing to have an acknowledgements section is a personal decision. Acknowledgements are typically meant to pay tribute to people close to us and to one's thesis supervisor. The student who chooses this option will do so in a simple and efficient manner, in one or two paragraphs on a separate page positioned just ahead of the table of contents.

With regard to a dedication, which also comes ahead of the table of contents (but after the acknowledgements), it is intended to pay homage to one or a few people who, in the eyes of the student, have played a meaningful role. It too, of course, is optional.

Note: Please do not add the acknowledgements section until after your defence when you are preparing the final version of your thesis.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction sets the scene. It sets out the broad parameters of the domain to be addressed and provides a 'taste' or 'road map' of what follows. Among other things, the introduction should deal with the questions that inspired your research interest and set them in context. Regardless of whether the research problem is inspired by a contemporary or historical social, political, economic, cultural, media issue or by a specific problem raised in the literature, it should be set in its broader conceptual context, and the potential contribution of the proposed research explained.

Elements addressed in the introduction

- What is the issue? What makes it relevant now?
- What is the background/history? – Broad, concise outline. Avoid turning this into an historical account or, in cases where the research is based on a personal experience, into an auto-biographical essay.
- What is the theoretical and epistemological location? – Not setting out one's argument, but rather the theoretical context within which the thesis rests.
- What is/are the central research question(s)? –The central questions should fall out of the theoretical location.
- Operationalization / Methodology for addressing central research question – 2-4 paragraphs '*Such and such a methodology has been used in settings A, B, C*'.

- Structure of the thesis – Elaborate on key points of each chapter (maximum 1 paragraph per chapter).

Chapter 2: Background/Theory/Literature Review

First, the relevant research literature should be critically reviewed, leading to a specification of the research questions or hypotheses addressed by the thesis. Obviously, it is not possible to cover all the literature on most topics. A particular skill that the thesis helps to foster is determining what is the relevant literature, and what is not so relevant. Thus it is incumbent upon the students to make their selections carefully and thoughtfully, highlighting the key findings and controversies that provide the justification for the research that is conducted.

This should be followed by a statement of the conceptual and theoretical framework used in doing the research. That is, the main aspects of the theoretical approach that you have used to frame your research project. At the end of this sub-section, the central research question and/or hypothesis of the research project should be clearly stated.

This chapter should end with a clear, concise discussion of the rationale for the research, its objectives and how addressing the central research question will contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon being examined and go beyond what is already known.

Procedures

- Structure of the chapter should be based on an ‘inverted triangle’ approach –ie. from the general to the specific.
- By the end of the chapter’s introduction section, the theoretical location of your research object should be made clear.
- Avoid making unsubstantiated claims and over-generalizations. You need to have some generality to locate the thesis. Therefore, try to find an appropriate balance.
- Convey that you have a well-grounded factual and theoretical understanding for the area in which you are working. This may entail structuring the chapter in such a way that it includes a sub-section focusing exclusively on background/history.
- Must have an awareness of both the current and relevant historical stances within the literature.
- Footnotes/Endnotes : deal with side debates. These are tangential but not being directly dealt with in the thesis.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

What is required in this chapter is a justification for what one has done. The first part of this chapter should concentrate on outlining the research strategy employed and present a justification for the particular approach selected to investigate the stated research question(s). The aim is not to simply chronicle the smallest minutiae of everything one has done to obtain one's data and results. Instead, this involves engaging in a discussion that seeks to persuade the examiners that the research strategy employed and the research tools used were appropriate.

The second task in this chapter is to summarize the particular methods and procedures adopted.

Regardless of the approach one follows (empirical versus theoretical/interpretive), a justification/rationale for its use should be provided. This involves specifying and discussing the (i) criteria employed in determining why the method used can be considered to be appropriate; and (ii) the reasons why other approaches were rejected. Here, it may be useful to think in terms of selecting the appropriate methodology in the same way that different medical interventions are used for different illnesses (i.e. Aspirin is good for headaches but not so good for other ailments).

All raw data and source materials relating to assessed assignment, including the Thesis, should be kept until students graduate from the University of Ottawa (i.e. until the date of the first graduation ceremony after the relevant exam board).

Empirically-focussed Theses

While research questions are normally of a general nature, undertaking empirical research involves operationalizing the question(s). That is, the central research question(s) must be made concrete and amenable to empirical investigation from data that is readily available.

For empirical projects, the research design typically involves a combination of approaches such as:

- surveys or qualitative interviewing;
- content or discourse analysis; and
- the systematic appraisal of documentary and other evidence (e.g. interpretive analysis).

A. The sampling or selection of data

Whether the design involves content analysis, an experiment, a survey or a set of qualitative interviews, the issue of sampling needs to be discussed in detail. ***On what basis was the sample selected?***

- For surveys this involves sampling respondents from some population.
- For qualitative interviewing the issue may be one of sampling significant currents of opinion or sampling an appropriate range of media users or producers.
- Where media or documentary material is being analysed, the procedure for selecting materials from a 'population' whose full extent may not be known should be described.

In the context of an PhD thesis, it may be helpful to outline the ideal strategy that one might employ without time or other resource constraints, and then to state how the actual method was selected and what limitations, in terms of data quality, this more feasible and practicable strategy entails. Some caution must be exercised when engaging in this form of 'self-critique' because it may potentially have a negative impact on the readers.

B. The design of research tools

Research tools refer to questionnaires, interview protocols, and coding frames for content analysis. Whatever the tool(s) used, it should be fully documented and any developmental/pilot work briefly reported. For a content analysis, the inter-coder reliability tests employed should be discussed.

The procedures adopted in selecting and/or developing your research tools, and the way(s) in which they have been applied needs to be summarised. The procedure described is the 'recipe' for conducting the research, after all the ingredients are assembled.

Note: For example, *how were the interviews conducted, were they recorded and later transcribed? How was the coding done?* Ultimately, the reader should be able to replicate what you did on the basis of the information provided.

Theoretically-Focussed or Interpretive Theses

The key difference between empirically and theoretically focussed reports is how the central part of the thesis is structured. The development of the research questions as well as the best way of organizing the discussion so that it is clearly focussed and reaches clear conclusions on the status of existing theoretical literature will vary greatly depending on the nature of the issues addressed.

Theoretical/interpretive work involves a critical examination of major concepts and theories including:

- analysis of the internal logic of arguments put forth by one or more authors regarding a particular subject; and
- comparative studies of different schools of thought vis-à-vis a particular issue/subjective.

Theses in this style will make a clear contribution to the existing theoretical literature.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

There is no one correct way of presenting the results and analysis. The presentation style adopted is primarily linked to whether the findings are quantitative or qualitative in nature. Students are encouraged to draw on their experience as consumers of academic research and to seek the advice of their supervisor(s) in deciding which presentation format is best suited.

Regardless of how the data and basic analysis are presented, there should follow a discussion that reviews the key findings and sets these in the context of both the research questions and the literature outlined in the introduction.

Explanations for surprising findings should be offered and reflective comments on the research design and methodology given. However, ***it is very important to avoid introducing new ideas/concepts that have not been dealt with up to this stage in the thesis.***

A. Quantitative Research

Results

In this sub-section, the main results, in terms of summary statistics, appropriate graphics and significance tests, should be reported. The results follow from the research question(s) as specified in a previous section of the dissertation and state whether the relevant hypotheses have been supported or not.

Discussion

The discussion should be structured in parallel with the central argument of the thesis. Hence, the findings are interpreted in light of the hypotheses or research questions, and then discussed in the context of the literature reviewed in the introduction. In other words, what has been empirically observed is set in the context of the research objectives and design and in relation to the broader problem area. Explanations should be offered for hypotheses that were not supported, and reflective comments on the research design and methodology given. Finally the implications should be discussed and opportunities for further research outlined.

B. Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the results and analysis often go hand in hand, but in some cases it may be possible to offer results and discussion separately. Results may be based on the outcome of a manual analytic procedure or taken from the output of one of the computer packages for textual analysis (e.g. NUDIST or ATLAS).

With qualitative research the results and the analysis are usually reported simultaneously. In such instances, it is advisable to structure the presentation of

the basis of commonly occurring themes, illustrating these with direct quotations from the transcripts. An explanation should be offered as to how the quotations were selected and the basis on which these are judged to be of importance.

If the results and analysis are to be presented separately, it may be useful to present the key findings from a set of interviews in an N by N tabular form. For example, the topic guide issues would be the column headings, and each row would correspond to one interview, with cells of the table offering a short summary of what the interviewees said on that topic. There would then follow the identification of the commonly occurring themes relevant to the broader research questions, which would be developed further through quotations from the transcripts (with references back to the tables for clarification).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This section should comprise a concise ‘punchy’ summary of the key insights and implications (theoretical, methodological, empirical) of the thesis. It also should provide a brief outline of the possibilities for further research.

Elements addressed in the conclusion

- Summary of findings.
- Why the findings are important, and/or contradict expected outcomes?
- Discussion of the ‘real world’ implications of the findings in relation to the current social challenges raised in the introduction.
- Reflections on those aspects of the thesis you feel need to be addressed (i.e. limitations, possibilities for further research).

Note: The last paragraph of the thesis is very important! A punchy concluding paragraph conveys to the examiner a fixed-sense that the thesis has strong central conclusions.

Bibliography/References

All references in the text should be fully and consistently cited in alphabetical order and formatted according to APA guidelines (see page 15).

Appendices

Any appendices should include only supporting material, data, statistical tables and/or transcripts that are deemed to be essential in the evaluation of the main text. It is generally not necessary to provide raw data if a summary analysis has been provided in the body of the dissertation. However, details of complex statistical procedures and relevant outputs, coding frames, code book, questionnaires and transcripts of interviews should be included.

APA guidelines :

http://sass.uottawa.ca/sites/sass.uottawa.ca/files/referencing_styles_apa.pdf

<http://www.apastyle.org/>

Plagiarism:

<https://www.uottawa.ca/about/sites/www.uottawa.ca.about/files/plagiarism.pdf>

3.3. DEADLINES

There are three dates for submitting a thesis for evaluation each term.

1. Last day of a the current term to submit a thesis without having to enrol in the following term.
2. Last day to submit a thesis in the current term and receive a 100% financial credit (applies only if you are enrolled exclusively in the thesis and were also enrolled in the thesis in the previous term).
3. Last day to submit a thesis and receive a 50% financial credit (applies only if you are enrolled exclusively in the thesis and were also enrolled in the thesis in the previous term). Credit not available if you are submitting a revised thesis.

Deadlines may vary each term so please refer to the online important academic dates and deadlines at : <http://www.registrar.uottawa.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=4172>

1. One month prior to submitting the thesis for evaluation, the student must submit the “List of exam. for thesis eval. » service request.

To this request the following must be attached:

- the List of Examiners for the Evaluation of the Thesis form. (Available at : <http://www.uottawa.ca/graduate-studies/students/forms>)
 - the external examiner form (Available at the academic agent’s office)
 - CV of the external examiner
 - draf of the thesis
2. Once the student is ready to submit for evaluation, he must submit the “Submission of thesis for eval.” service request.

To this request, a Word copy of the thesis must be attached.

4. THESIS EVALUATION CRITERIA

4.1 Criteria for Success

4.2 Failure Criteria

4.1. Criteria for Success

Examiners are looking for a number of qualities in a successful thesis. There are three broad categories under which a thesis and/or research paper is evaluated. Each of these elements is important and is outlined below. *These are only informal guidelines listing the types of factors that usually are taken into account by thesis and/or research paper examiners.*

Presentation

- Clarity of expression.
- A coherent and consistent structure (with appropriate chapters, titles and subtitles).
- Satisfactory abstract.
- Complete, correct and consistent referencing of the relevant literature.
- Satisfactory appendices (including, as appropriate, details of complex statistical procedures and relevant outputs, coding frames, code books, individual interviews and focus groups topic guide, questionnaires, statistical tables and transcripts judged to be essential in the evaluation of main text (full interview transcripts are not necessary)).

Content

- Quality and breadth of literature survey.
- Fit between assessment of the literature and choice of research focus.
- Appropriateness of overall research design and strategy.
- Selection and implementation of research methods and techniques.
- Quality/adequacy of data integration and data analysis.
- Interpretation of results in relation to the literature.
- Identification of research gaps and shortcomings.
- Discussion of further research.

Critical Judgment

- Depth of interpretation.
- Theoretical sophistication.
- Critical appraisal.
- Thoroughness of analysis.
- Imaginativeness, flair, boldness.
- Awareness of the limitations of the study and/or its major conclusions.

4.2.Failure Criteria

- Failure to demonstrate substantial effort in the thesis or research paper.
- Demonstrating a fundamental lack of understanding of what a thesis and/or major research paper (compared to an essay) involves.

- Fundamental errors in analysis/interpretation of data/evidence.
- Fundamental flaws in the logic of arguments presented.
- Lack of connection between evidence and claims made in the thesis.