

# **The Master's Thesis Process**

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## **What is a Thesis?**

>> At its heart, a thesis is an historical analysis of primary sources. It must be based, therefore, on substantive primary source research, and reflect some sensitivity to the relative strengths and challenges of those sources.

>> As part of its analysis, a thesis must also situate that research within historical analyses that have already been published. That means identifying related sets of historiographical discussions and explaining how your topic and argument supports, builds upon, or revises the conclusions of existing literature in related fields.

>> Another part of its analysis is your own, so it should make an argument by responding to one or a set of central research questions. Your thesis needs a thesis, in other words. That argument will be your own particular analysis of the sources and their historical significance. It need not be completely original, but should reflect your own particular take on the topic.

>> In terms of size, 75-90 pages of actual text is appropriate (it will be longer with front matter and bibliography). Some theses are longer, but the best thesis is a finished one. Think three, 20-25 page chapters with an intro and conclusion.

>> The form of your thesis may be a traditional scholarly paper, or it may be geared towards public history or applied research. As long as it satisfies the above requirements, there is room for creativity in its shape and form. Examples might include a section of exhibit design or site interpretation. If you choose this more applied form, be sure to explain it clearly in your prospectus (doing it in the chapter outline section makes sense, and probably also in your opening section), and get approval of your full committee at your prospectus meeting before you write.

## **Pick a Topic**

>> Topics vary widely and yours can be almost anything as long as it is historical, there are enough primary sources to support it, you analyze it appropriately, and your advisor approves.

>> Deciding on a thesis topic is often a matter of serendipity. Keep your eyes open for possibilities as you read books and articles for your classes. What subjects are of particular interest to you? If you are intrigued by a study that was done in Location A or Time 1, might the topic be something you could replicate in Location B or Time 2? You might apply a new methodological approach to an established topic; or see what happens when you bring two previously unconnected ideas or topics together. Look at the collection of theses in Amy's office (CA504L) for examples. Talk to your professors and to archivists.

>> Looking through guides to research collections may also suggest possibilities. The Indiana Historical Society Library, for example, has guides (originally printed, now online) that focus on its collections relating to African-American history, ethnic history, and women's history. Ditto

for the Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives in the IUPUI University Library. And many of the chapters in Robert M. Taylor, Jr., ed., *The State of Indiana History 2000* suggest topics on which additional research needs to be done.

>> Your subject should entail original research in primary sources—supplemented, of course, with secondary materials. There is no sense plowing exactly the same historical ground that others have already plowed. This does not mean that you cannot explore subjects that have already been examined, but you should approach them from a different angle or ask new questions of previously examined materials.

>> Select a subject in which you are interested, since you will be living with it for some time. But you should also be practical and select a topic for which research materials are available and accessible.

>> It is perfectly acceptable to base your thesis on research you conduct as part of a public history internship. You should clear it with your committee and the Director of Graduate Studies, and recognize that you will need to present and analyze this research as a thesis (rather than in its internship form) to satisfy the departmental requirements for the Master's degree.

>> Be aware that if you intend to conduct oral history interviews as part of your research you will have to obtain approval from the Research Compliance office of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This will involve, among other things, taking an on-line exam regarding "Protection of Human Subjects in Research" and preparing a formal informed consent statement to give to interviewees. The entire process can take several months. See the Office of Research Administration (<http://researchadmin.iu.edu/cs-humsub.html>) and look under the Indianapolis campus tab for information. Dr. Scarpino has templates for the IRB and is our most experienced oral historian, so please see him if you are interested in doing any oral histories.

### **Select a Committee**

>> You are responsible for "recruiting" the members of your thesis committee, although the departmental director of graduate studies is available to offer advice and suggestions in this regard. You should select individuals with whom you feel comfortable working and who have some familiarity with or interest in the topic you wish to pursue. The chair of the committee (who becomes your principal advisor) is the person with whom you will be working most closely.

>> The committee consists of a minimum of three faculty members.

>> Two of the three members (including the chair) must be either full-time or adjunct members of the history department faculty.

>> The chair of the committee must be a full or associate member of the IU or Purdue graduate faculty. [Currently, all members of the full-time history faculty at IUPUI are also members of the

graduate faculty.]

>> Generally (although this is not an absolute requirement) a student on the U.S. or public history "track" should have two U.S. specialists and one non-U.S. specialist on the committee. Likewise, a student on the European "track" should have two committee members who focus on European history and one who does not. Sometimes students choose faculty from outside the History department to serve as their "outside" member.

### **Register the Topic and Committee**

>> The department strongly suggests that students identify a tentative topic and select the chair of the committee by the time 15 graduate credit hours have been completed. Full time students should settle on a thesis advisor by the end of their first year.

>> In order to register for thesis credit hours (H898), you must complete the form "Authorization for H898 Graduate Thesis Hours" (obtain this from and return it to the graduate program secretary). This will ask for the working title (or topic) of the thesis and the members of the committee. You must identify at least the chair of the committee in order to register for H898.

>> Students generally begin registering for thesis credits after they have completed most (but not necessarily all) other course work. Thesis credits do not have to be taken all at once; they may be spread out over several semesters as long as the required number of credits has been taken by the time the thesis is completed.

>> Master's students do not have to be registered during the semester in which they complete their thesis. (Exception: International students who have completed the normal credit hour requirements for the degree may have to register for GRAD G599.)

### **Prepare a Thesis Proposal/Precis/Research Design**

>> The chair of your committee is likely to ask you to prepare such a document—a blueprint for the project—for consideration and approval by the full committee. The accompanying "Master's Thesis Prospectus Guide" (<http://www.iupui.edu/~history/documents/prospectusguide.pdf>) provides useful suggestions for developing a thesis proposal.

>>It is a good idea no matter what, to meet with your entire committee and discuss your project before you embark upon your thesis work. Then you can share ideas and sources, identify potential weak spots, and get preliminary approval for the project. This meeting will ultimately make your thesis defense more interesting and productive. It is also very important if you are planning on writing a thesis with an applied or public history component, as your committee will need to approve your plan before you write. We encourage full time students to get their prospectus approved soon after their first year of courses, so they can use the summer for effective research. See "Measuring Progress toward the MA" under the resources tab.

## **Research**

>> "A good note is a joy forever." – Martin Ridge

## **Write**

>> There are no requirements regarding length. Simply as a point of reference, most theses completed in the history department in recent years are in the range of 90 to 140 pages (including notes and bibliography). Longer is not necessarily better.

>> You may use either footnotes or endnotes (although your advisor may have a preference).

>> You may include a bibliography, a select bibliography, an annotated bibliography, or a bibliographical essay (again, your advisor may have a preference). As you know, historians use the Chicago Manual of Style or Turabian for format.

>> You should discuss with your advisor how he or she wishes to direct the thesis process. Most advisors will want to see drafts of chapters as they are written, rather than waiting until the entire thesis is finished. Your advisor will give your chapters a close reading and comments for revision. Normally you will wait until near the end of the process to involve the second and third readers. You can confirm all this at your prospectus meeting. No matter what, it is important to maintain regular communication with your advisor.

>> Read Indiana University's "A Guide to the Preparation of Theses and Dissertations" carefully (there is a link to this PDF document through the history department website under "graduate studies" and also through the graduate office page at the bottom of the "current students" page: <http://www.iupui.edu/~gradoff/students/>) to be sure you are following appropriate format in your document. Before you can graduate you will have to get this formatting approved by the Graduate School, so it helps to keep these guidelines in mind as you write. You may want to make an appointment for a pre-format check with the Graduate School Recorder, Debra Barker, if you have any questions. There are templates for the acceptance page and title page available on our website under the "resources" tab.

## **Defend Your Thesis**

>> Once your advisor decides that the thesis is in more-or-less final shape, you and/or your advisor schedule a thesis "defense" that involves all members of the committee. (All members of the history faculty are invited to attend, but generally it is just the members of the committee who do so.) The defense is usually held in a seminar room (often CA537) and is normally scheduled for two hours.

>> Remind the departmental director of graduate studies that you are getting ready to defend, so they can fill out an "Application for Advanced Degree" form approximately 60 days prior to the date you expect to submit the bound thesis. Also, confirm your mailing address on ONESTART.

>> At least two full weeks before the defense you need to give hard copies of your final draft to all members of the committee.

>> Advise the departmental director of graduate studies once your defense has been scheduled so they can complete required paperwork for your graduation (e.g., "Recommendation for Advanced Degree," removal of any deferred grades).

>> This is also a good time to call the Graduate Office (274-1577) and make an appointment for a thesis format check. Make the appointment for about a week after your defense, as you will likely need to make some revisions based on comments that arise from the defense. These meetings take about 1.5 hours and the Recorder gets booked up quickly near the end of semesters. If you aren't sure how long you will need for revisions and don't care exactly when you get your final thesis submitted, you should wait and make this appointment immediately after your defense.

>> The term "defense" suggests an adversarial situation. In fact, "discussion" or "seminar" probably comes closer to the mark. Committee members will have questions about your work and suggestions for improvement, but you are the expert on the subject. This is the moment you become a fellow historian. Talk with your advisor about what you should expect; they will probably give you some questions to think about. You might also want to prepare some comments about the challenges and strengths of your final product.

>> Read over your thesis the night before. Get a good night's sleep. And remember that you know more about the topic than anyone else in the room.

>> Prepare the "Acceptance Page," take it with you to the defense, and give it to your advisor (**Note that this must be on 100% cotton rag paper – see “thesis guidelines” from the Graduate School for specific wording and format – Amy has a template for this page as well as the title page posted under the “resources” tab.**) This page must be signed by all members of the committee after the defense. (Ask committee members in advance how they would like their names to appear.) The chair of the committee will hold it until any necessary revisions are completed. Once the signed acceptance page is in your possession do not fold, spindle, mutilate, or lose it.

>> Do something festive after the defense. There is still work to do (see below) but give yourself a reward.

### **Complete Your Thesis**

>> Make any revisions required by your committee and secure final approval. Get the signed acceptance page from your advisor, and make an appointment with the Graduate Office (if you haven't done so already) for a thesis format check.

>> Read carefully the format requirements of the Graduate School (see "A Guide to the

Preparation of Theses and Dissertations”) and prepare a final copy on regular printer paper according to those specifications. Remember to include a vita as the last (un-numbered) page.

>> Make some copies of the original, signed acceptance page for the copies of the thesis you will have bound and submit the original one, **on 100% cotton rag paper**, to the Graduate School when you go in for your format check. Note that the acceptance page on the version you submit electronically should NOT be signed.

>> Once the format has been approved, you will receive an email that walks you through the process of submitting an electronic version of your thesis to the University Library. Then you will need at least one bound hard copy for the department. (It does not have to be on special paper.) Many students also have one copy bound for themselves and one for their advisor. Print and/or photocopy the desired number of copies and make arrangements to have them bound. (It takes seven days for a “rush” order at the National Library Bindery Company of Indiana. See [www.NLBCo.com](http://www.NLBCo.com) for their contact information.)

>> Submit your bound copy to the Graduate School and advise the director of graduate studies that you have done so. (It’s also nice to offer a bound copy to your thesis advisor, though not mandatory.) Once the Graduate School gets this bound copy, the Recorder notes it in your file that you have finished the entire thesis process. Then the History Department gets this bound copy for our shelf.

>> PARTY TIME! Kick back and wait for your diploma to arrive in the mail. Then frame it and put it in a place of honor.

>> Diplomas are sent to the Student Home address in Onestart.

Fall graduates, Sep-Dec, are mailed after commencement in May.

Spring graduates, Jan-May, are mailed in late August.

Summer graduates, June-Aug, are mailed beginning of December.