

Information for my MA thesis advisees

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The process of researching and writing an MA thesis probably isn't exactly like anything you have ever done before. The purpose of this handout is to start a conversation about the thesis and the thesis process, so that you (as advisee) and I (as your advisor/thesis director) have the same picture in our heads about how the process is going to work. I know that this document is a little long, but please read through it carefully, and let me know if you have any questions. You might want to give this another look each time you enter a new phase of the thesis process.

I expect this document to continue to change over time, so feel free to add to or suggest changes to the points listed below if you can think of information that might be helpful to future MA advisees.

1. Meetings

- (1) Regular contact between advisee and advisor is very important for keeping the project on track. Here are my default expectations (although these can be adjusted for specific situations):
 - We will be in touch during the spring of your first year to talk about your topics of interest and plan what you will do over the summer. Ideally, we will meet in person or be in contact by email several times over the summer as well.
 - Remember that the summer after your first year is a crucial opportunity for getting the thesis project rolling before coursework sets in again. Students who do not make use of this summer to start reading the research literature and developing a working outline of a thesis topic always say later that they regret having missed that chance.
 - Serious work on the thesis needs to continue in the fall of the second year, even though you are also taking other courses that semester. (This is hard. The best way to make it happen is to set things up so that a term paper for at least one fall course is related to the thesis topic and can share background research, or even theory and analysis, with the thesis.)
 - During your second year, we will meet every week. At these meetings, you will present your progress for the week and raise any questions that you would like to discuss.
 - Topics for discussion at weekly meetings include papers you have been reading, data you have been working with, proposed plans for topics to research, the design of your experiment or data-collection methodology, etc. Basically, whatever work you have been doing connected to your thesis project over the past week can be a discussion topic.
 - Meetings generally last between half an hour to an hour each time. The more thoughts and ideas you have at each meeting, the better the thesis project you are likely to develop.
 - During periods of intense data collection or writing, we may meet less frequently if that is better for your progress on the project. Conversely, if you would like to meet more frequently at certain stages of the project, let me know and we'll see what we can do.
- (2) My default expectation is that you will bring a meeting handout along for every weekly meeting. (You can send this by email if you prefer, in which case PDF is appreciated.) The meeting handout should present the information you plan to discuss, in outline form with numbered examples; think of it as practice for making a class or conference presentation handout.
 - I need the handout in order to be able to discuss your ideas with you. You've been thinking about your topic all week, so it's a lot more familiar to you than it is to me. When you make the handout, it gives you a chance to spell out your ideas or your arguments step-by-step, so that they are accessible to someone encountering your ideas for the first time (i.e., me).
 - The handouts become a record of your thoughts and ideas. As your project develops, they will start to serve as outlines for actual sections and chapters of your thesis.

- (3) During your second year, in addition to meeting with me, you will also attend the P-side “lab meeting” every week with other Smith and Moreton advisees and present your research regularly to your peers. Students have typically found the peer support and interaction that P-side meetings provide to be helpful and motivating. If you don’t find this to be true, please talk to me ASAP so that we can find a way to make P-side work better for you.
- (4) Once coursework is completed, you will generally sign up for three hours of thesis credit in every semester until the thesis is complete. (P-side attendance is mandatory for thesis credit.)
 - Ideally, the thesis is finished by the end of the spring semester in the second year. However, some students find it necessary to enroll for summer session in order to complete all thesis requirements. (Faculty are not guaranteed to be available during summers, so plan carefully.)
 - Remember that you need to be enrolled for any semester (or summer session) during which you complete a formal requirement. This includes the thesis defense.
- (5) Don’t forget to have meetings with your other thesis committee members as well. When you ask a faculty member to be on your committee, that is a good time to ask them how often they would like to meet with you or hear from you. Some members might want to meet often; others might just want to read the defense draft when it is finished; and there’s a whole range in between. This will depend on lots of factors, including personal style, how many other students the committee member is advising, or how close the thesis topic is to the committee member’s research expertise.

2. Expectations for the scope of the thesis

- (6) The goal of an MA thesis is for you to develop a project, carry out the necessary background research, and contribute something original to the discipline.
 - Note the implication here: You are now transitioning from a *student*, who masters concepts and completes work assigned by other people, to a *researcher*, who is a producer of NEW knowledge and who takes the initiative to understand how that new knowledge fits into what the research community already knows. You own this process—don’t wait for someone else to tell you what to do.
 - That said, you don’t have to work in a vacuum! You are strongly encouraged to talk with faculty members and grad-student colleagues often. Discussion, feedback, and exchanging suggestions are important parts of the research process too.
- (7) You will develop your own topic (with feedback and suggestions from me as your advisor; I can help you decide the scope of the project, as well as determining whether the topic is likely to be a good fit for your background, strengths, and future plans). You’re going to work hard on this project, and at the end you will have become an expert on your topic. Make sure you choose a topic you’re genuinely interested in, and if you have future plans in linguistics or something related, also be thinking about how to use your thesis to advance your long-term career goals.
- (8) Page length varies according to the topic, but the thesis should be considerably more substantial than a term paper for a course.
- (9) If you plan to apply for a PhD program or look for an academic job, you are strongly encouraged to submit a revised version of your thesis or part thereof as a journal article or conference paper.

3. The thesis prospectus

- (10) Here is what the department web site says about the prospectus:
 - “During the semester following completion of the non-elective courses (which should be the Fall term of the second year), students will form an examining committee of three faculty members in the department. It is expected that this committee will also serve as the MA thesis

committee. The student will submit a prospectus of the MA thesis, as described below. The oral examination will assess the student's mastery of topics from the first year sequence of coursework and gauge the merits of the prospectus.”

- “The prospectus should state clearly what problem is to be investigated, how the investigation is to be carried out (written research, field work, experiment, etc.), and a preliminary bibliography. The prospectus should first be discussed with the thesis director. Students should then submit a ‘clean’ version to all three committee members and set up a meeting with the examining committee.”

(11) At what stage does the prospectus defense occur? This may depend on the type of thesis you are writing.

- If your topic involves carrying out experiments, you should pin down your experimental design and methodology very early in the process in order to allow time for recruiting participants and collecting and analyzing data. So, you should aim for an early prospectus defense. The middle of the fall semester would be ideal.
- If your topic is concerned more with making arguments about linguistic theory than about collecting new data from human participants, it may make sense to spend more time before the prospectus defense reading and understanding the theoretical literature. Still, don't put off your prospectus defense any longer than necessary! Aim for the very beginning of the spring semester at the latest, to be sure you have time to defend your thesis itself in the spring.

4. Writing, defending, and revising the thesis

(12) Be prepared to submit multiple drafts of the parts of your thesis for discussion and feedback. A thesis is not something you hand in all at once when you are “done;” it is something that you are slowly developing over the time-frame of a year or more.

- Regularly submitting small pieces of writing for feedback, such as sections or even subsections, is encouraged. You might also choose to write something up in outline or handout form to get initial feedback before turning it into connected prose.
- If you plan to discuss a piece of writing at your weekly meeting, it is best if you can get it to me ahead of time so that I have a chance to read it before we meet.

(13) Be prepared for the possibility of drastic rewriting when the project nears completion. Very often, it isn't until quite far along in the thesis process that it becomes clear what the main point of your thesis is actually going to be. This is completely normal (and may be a sign of a very good project), but it can mean that the order of the sections of your thesis needs to change, or that some of the sections you wrote early in the process need to be thoroughly revised to fit in with a new perspective on the overall project.

(14) Do not underestimate how much time it will take to research and write a thesis—you have lots of experience writing term papers by now, but the scope of a thesis project really is bigger, and it really does take longer.

- A lot of your important thinking about what the project “means”, why it is important, and what it connects to will happen *after* the nitty-gritty work (data collection, phonological analysis of case studies, etc.) is done. Be sure to plan for this—have the data collection or case-study analyses finished a month or two ahead of your completion deadline so that you leave enough time for the important conceptual work that comes at the end of the process.

(15) The final stages of the thesis process are: defense draft, thesis defense, thesis revisions.

- If you think you are getting ready to defend, we should discuss your defense date. This is something you and I will decide together (subject to availability of other committee members).

- Please remember the following, from the department web site: “Students should avoid scheduling a thesis defense during the summer, since faculty members are often not available. If it is absolutely unavoidable, students should consult committee members well in advance.”
- You should circulate the defense draft to all members of your thesis committee no less than one week before your defense date (two weeks is better). I need to vet the defense draft before it goes out to the rest of the committee, so be sure to budget this step into your time planning.
- The thesis defense consists of a 10–15-minute presentation of the highlights of your project, followed by questions and discussion from the committee and from the audience, if any.
 - I strongly encourage you to have an “open” defense so that your fellow students and other faculty can attend and can see the fruits of your hard work! This is also useful education for newer students in the program, and helps keep the sense of an intellectual community in our department strong.
- At the thesis defense, your committee members will request revisions for you to complete before the final version of the thesis is submitted. This is a normal part of the process.

Above all, please stay in communication! If you have questions about how to manage thesis research and writing, or if something about the way the advising process usually goes isn’t working for you, let’s talk about it. The goal of the advising process is to support you in your thinking, research, and writing so that you can produce a successful project and learn how to think, research, and write like a professional. We should structure our working relationship to best achieve these goals.