

How to Write a Master's Thesis

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Students learning how to write a Master's Thesis will first learn that a central thesis question must be presented and subsequently answered. A Master's Thesis will be the most prominent piece of your graduate work up to this point, and a pertinent thesis question that forms the spine of this work elevates it from the prosaic to the significant.

Part 1: Choosing a Topic

- 1. Think about what interests you.** You will spend much time working on this project, so it is imperative that you choose a topic that you are truly interested in, something that you will not grow bored of after a short period. Try thinking about your favorite subject of study - it may be a particular author, theory, period, etc. Imagine how you might further the study of that subject. If you are having trouble thinking about your academic interests, you might consider skimming through papers you wrote for your graduate courses and see if there is any apparent topic that you tend to gravitate towards.
- 2. Choose your thesis question.** Carefully consider questions for your Master's thesis that will generate important research and answers for the members of the educational community and their clients. In your Master's thesis, you must answer the thesis question with conviction and clarity in the written presentation submitted to complete a Master's degree. Make sure that your question and the answers provided will provide original content to the body of research in existence. A judicious question will also keep research focused, organized, and interesting.
- 3. Conduct your research.** To answer the central question of your Master's thesis, you'll need to conduct the research necessary. Read the texts, conduct the experiments, do what you have to do to answer your thesis question. This will allow you to see if your project is worth moving forward

¹ This text is to a large extent based on <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Master%27s-Thesis>, however, it has been specified according to the needs and requirements of a Master's Thesis in North American Studies at the University of Cologne.

with, or if there are some inherent problems that you may need to work out. It will also help you gather the information you'll need to move forward to the next steps.

Part 2: Selecting your Sources and Texts

- 1. Complete a literature review.** Review the literature and research currently available that is relevant to your Master's thesis. This also includes newer literature which reflects the state of research on a specific topic. This review of the literature must be exhaustive to ensure that your Master's thesis will be important and not be redundant. It is important that your thesis idea is original and relevant. To ensure this is the case, you need to be aware of the context of your research, what other people have said on the subject, and what the general opinion of your topic is. Take notes on the background information about your topic and the people involved in the available material.
- 2. Choose your primary sources.** Primary sources are those that are written by the person who created the idea/story/theory/experiment/etc. They are the important factual base that you will use in your Master's thesis. For example, an agreement between two parties or a novel written by Ernest Hemingway or a scientific journal article in which new results are documented for the first time would both be considered primary sources. The answer to the question, whether some text can be regarded as a primary source, however, depends totally on your research question.
- 3. Choose your secondary sources.** Secondary sources are sources that are written *about* primary sources and the problem of your thesis. They are important to include in your Master's thesis because you'll need to demonstrate that you have a solid understanding of the critical context of your topic and that you understand what the major scholars in your field have to say about the subject. For example, a book was written about the agreement between two parties, a book about Ernest Hemingway's novel or a scientific journal article examining the findings

of someone else's experiment would both be considered secondary sources.

- 4. Manage your citations.** Depending upon your field, you might front-load most of your research into an early chapter of the thesis, or you might include sources throughout the entirety of the document. Either way, you're likely to need to keep track of many different citations. You need to keep track of your citations as you write, rather than trying to add them after you are finished writing. Use the in-text citation format appropriate to your discipline. The most common formats are Chicago, MLA or the Prussian System. Create a reference entry for each source, you cite in the text of your document or in a footnote. You must use a citation management software such as EndNote, Mendeley, or Zotero. Only these will enable you to insert and move citations within your word processor program and will automatically populate the bibliography at the end of your thesis.

Part 3: Planning an Outline

- 1. Know the requirements for your field/department.** An English Master's Thesis has different requirements and employs different formats than a Master's Thesis in Chemistry. There are two types of Master's theses: Qualitative. This type of thesis involves completing a project that is exploratory, analytical, or creative in some way. Usually, students in the humanities will complete this kind of thesis. In History, however, also the second type of study is applicable. Quantitative. This type of thesis involves conducting experiments, measuring data, and recording results. Students in the sciences, sociology, and history usually complete this kind of thesis.
- 2. Nail down your thesis idea.** Prepare a clear statement of the central thesis question that you intend to answer with your research. Being able to state your thesis explicitly and clearly is important. If you struggle to state the question, you might need to rethink your project altogether.
- 3. Prepare an outline.** The outline will be beneficial to you to "see where you are going" as you move forward in your project, but also to give your committee members an idea of what you want to accomplish and how you plan to do so.

4. Know what to include. You should check with your university for the exact requirements, but most Master's theses should include the following:

- i. Title page
- ii. Signature page (with the completed signatures of your advising committee - usually attained at the defense, or after the project is deemed *complete*)
- iii. Table of Contents (with page numbers)
- iv. Introduction
- v. Body of paper
- vi. Conclusion
- vii. Works Cited or Bibliography A) Sources B) Secondary Works
- viii. Any necessary appendices or endnotes

Part 4: Moving through the Writing Process

- 1. Make a schedule.** One approach that works for many people is to use a reverse calendar, where you plan your writing schedule from the due date and work backward. If you know how much time you have to complete the project and break it up into manageable parts with individual due dates (whether these due dates are simply for you or if they are for your committee chair as well), you will be less likely to get overwhelmed by the scale of the project.
- 2. Write a little every day.** Writing 30 finished pages in two weeks is a daunting task, but if you write 500 words every day, then you will be able to meet that deadline with ease. Try not to get frustrated and put off your work because then it will pile up and become unmanageable.
- 3. Take breaks.** It is important, especially when working on a large-scale project, to give your brain a break now and then. You cannot stay focused and on-task 100% of the time without losing content quality, and letting yourself step away from your ideas for a couple of days will give you fresh eyes when you come back to your work. You'll catch mistakes you did not see before and come up with new answers you could not think of before.

4. **Write your introduction.** You may find that your thesis proposal is a useful jumping off point for writing your introduction. You might want to copy and paste sections of your proposal for the start of your introduction, but remember that it is okay to change your ideas as they progress. You may want to revisit and revise your introduction at several points throughout your writing process, perhaps even each time you finish a large section or chapter.
5. **Incorporate the review of the literature.** If you were required to write a review of literature before beginning your thesis, good news: you've already written almost an entire chapter! Again, you may need to reshape and revise the work, and you will likely also find occasion to add to the review as you move forward with your work. If you do not already have a review of literature written, it is time to do your research! The review of literature is essentially a summary of all of the existing scholarship about your topic with plenty of direct quotations from the primary and secondary sources that you're referencing.
6. **Contextualize your work.** After reviewing the existing scholarship, you should explain how your work contributes to the existing scholarship—in other words, you're explaining what you are adding to the field with your work.
7. **Write your thesis.** The remainder of the thesis varies greatly by field. A science-based thesis will involve few secondary sources as the remainder of your work will involve describing and presenting the results of a study. A literary thesis, on the other hand, will likely continue to cite secondary scholarship as it builds an analysis or reading of a particular text or texts.
8. **Write a powerful conclusion.** Your conclusion should detail the importance of this Master's thesis to the subject community and may suggest the direction that future researchers might follow to continue with relevant information on the subject.
9. **Add supplemental information.** Be sure to include relevant charts, graphs, and figure as appropriate. You may also need to add appendices at the end of your work that is germane to your work but tangential to the central question of your Master's thesis. Be sure that all aspects of your work are formatted by the guidelines of your institutional and discipline expectations.

Part 5: Finalizing Your Thesis

- 1. Compare your draft with your university's requirements.** The formatting requirements for theses and dissertations are notoriously tedious and complicated. Make sure that your documents adhere to all of the requirements laid out by your department, in general, and by your committee chair, in specific. Many departments or programs provide a document template for theses and dissertations. If you have one of these, it may be easiest to use such a template from the beginning of your work (rather than copying and pasting your writing into it).
- 2. Re-read the entire thesis for correctness.** Take a week or so off, if possible, once you have finished writing and give your brain a break. Then, go back with fresh eyes to catch any grammatical errors or typos you may have made. When you are so deep in the writing process, it is easy to just read what you *mean* instead of what you actually *wrote*. So it is important to take a step back so that you can evaluate your work and your writing more effectively. Additionally, ask a trusted colleague or friend who is a native speaker to read over your thesis to help you catch any minor grammar/spelling/punctuation errors and typos. Make sure you do not commit plagiarism. Everything you quote or paraphrase must be accounted for in a footnote or its equivalent.
- 3. Follow all printing guidelines according to your department's policies.** You will probably have to print two copies of your Master's thesis for your university, as well as any other personal copies you may want for yourself. Make sure you abide by these guidelines to avoid any potential setbacks during this final stage. Make sure to include the prescribed text concerning plagiarism as handed out by the Prüfungsamt.