

MA Thesis Guidelines and Structure

The graduate candidate should write the MA thesis like a peer-reviewed journal article that has been published on a research topic similar to her/his own. In the literature review search, the candidate can identify an appropriate (qualitative or quantitative) published article that has significantly informed their research and which can be used as a guide/model. The MA thesis should adhere to the citation format that is consistent with that journal. The following guidelines should be followed when writing up the sections and chapters of the MA thesis.

1. Abstract

- Write a 120 word (or less) comprehensive summary of the contents of the research.

2. Introduction

- Introduce your research problem; what will you focus this study upon?
- Address why this topic is sociologically relevant.
- Present a research question that will guide your research
- Introduce your research design – what theory and methodological approach will you employ to generate and analyze the data that allows you to answer your research question?
- The introduction should be fairly brief and straight forward. It should orient the reader and provide a roadmap for where you are going in the rest of the thesis. You can reference the later chapters, which will discuss items in more detail.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

- You should start by doing a fair amount of research and reading into the research areas upon which your study hinges.
 - Literature reviews explore previous important contributions, core findings, main arguments in the field, introduce theoretical concepts and frameworks, and demonstrate holes/absences in the literature (particularly where you can fill them in).
- This *should not* just be a summary; you should develop a critical and clear analysis that highlights thematically the main arguments in your field. Every topic should have implications for your research (this is not a broad survey but a focused one that sets up your research objectives).
- Use the literature to show *why* you are doing this exact research project – like what do you hope to contribute to this body of research? What is missing that your research might shed light upon? It might be as simple as a replication of a previous study on a different population or dataset, or a whole new way of thinking about an issue. The key is to discuss how your research *fits* with what has been done before.
- You should offer an explanatory discussion of the theoretical framework and/or concepts that you will employ to analyze your data. For qualitative theses, you should end this section with this theoretical discussion.
- For quantitative studies, you should include at the end of this section the main hypotheses generated by your consideration of the literature that will guide your data analysis.

4. **Data and Methods Section (label for quantitative theses) or Methods Section (label for qualitative theses)**

- Discuss what you did to research this topic; what was your research design? Describe with detail the methods of data generation, analysis, and write-up that you employed.
 - Give enough detail so that another researcher could replicate your study by reading your methods section.
- You should have a thorough discussion of how you sampled your data and any justifications of why you used a particular sample, dataset, etc. Quantitative theses should offer a thorough discussion of the data in this section. (Qualitative theses should focus only on discussing and justifying the research methods you employed and hold off discussing your data until the following chapters.)
- Explain your method of analysis in detail (don't forget equations if appropriate for a quantitative analysis).
- Discuss why the methods of data generation, analysis, and write-up that you are using are appropriate, and if necessary why a different approach was not taken.
- Address any major limitations of your method.
- In quantitative theses, you should discuss thoroughly how you operationalize your concepts as variables and any major guiding principles for your analysis. In qualitative theses, some qualitative research operationalizes variables but much qualitative research does not. This depends on your research design and epistemological and methodological objectives. Discuss this with your MA chair to see if you should/should not operationalize variables.
- It is acceptable to use the notation [Insert Figure 1 about here] or [Insert Table 2 here] or place all tables and figures at the end.

5a. **Results or Data Presentation***

- What are your findings?
 - Include subsections with subtitles, which present prominent themes in data.
 - Organize your data so that it answers your research question(s), addresses your hypotheses, elaborates your application of theory, etc.
- Demonstrate your data – use tables, graphs, quotes, textual data, or other appropriate techniques.
- For theses that separate out presentation of results from your discussion of findings, this section should simply present and describe the results. You should hold off on analytic discussion until the next chapter. Highlight the salient points or themes that you will discuss further in the following chapter. This section should not simply be a data dump.
- Any supporting data or alternative models that do not fit as key salient points should be relegated to an appendix.
- In quantitative theses, if you are doing a regression analysis or some other inferential technique, you should include a section on basic descriptive statistics before transitioning to your main analysis.
- In qualitative theses, this is the section to tell the stories and elucidate the meanings that qualitative research generates. Draw from field notes, cases, characterizations, interview quotes, etc., to develop a narrative about the findings you want to forefront.
- For those qualitative theses that both present and analyze data in the same section, be sure to also present your analysis of these findings. Follow the instructions for the discussion section below to guide how to engage in analysis; what do your findings mean, sociologically, and in light of your framing of the literature? You can then summarize your core analytical claims and discuss the implications of these findings in the conclusion.

5b. Discussion*

- This is the place where you present core analytical claims about your data *and* discuss what your findings mean. What do your findings demonstrate sociologically?
- Do this by tying your findings back to your literature review and by using your theoretical concepts and frameworks to highlight core analytical insights from your data.
- You can think about this in terms of how your research contributes to the existing research, and/or how does it extend it?

6. Conclusion

- Keep this section fairly short—hit the highlights.
- Summarize core findings and analytical claims; emphasize what you want readers to walk away with.
- Show *how* you have answered your research question.
- Discuss the implications of your findings and argument.
- Address limitations of this study.
- What future research do you see as important on your topic and given your study?

7. Literature Cited/References

- This section should contain the full reference to any work cited in the body of your thesis. *It should not contain sources that are not cited in your thesis.*
- Follow a referencing style that is used by a sociology journal in your area, or use APA.

8. Appendices

- Any additional models or tests of alternative variable specifications that do not need to be discussed in detail but warrant a sentence or a paragraph in the results or discussion chapters should go here. Alternatively, you may want to present results graphically, or in an easier format for the reader (such as predicted probabilities) and then put the underlying tables (e.g. full regression models) in the appendices.
- Any instrument or coding mechanism you used should be included in the appendix if not thoroughly discussed in the methods section.
- You should have a separate appendix for each type of issue.

*The Chair has discretion to organize 5a and 5b as they feel is most suitable for the thesis type (qualitative versus quantitative).

MA Thesis Oral Defense Protocol

Generally, the MA oral defense meeting should be scheduled when the Chair feels the thesis is ready to be defended upon completion of a clean and complete draft of the thesis. Other committee members should be given the penultimate draft *two weeks* before the defense date.

1. The candidate gives a 15-minute overview presentation on their thesis, preferably using PowerPoint to highlight key information on research questions, literature, methods, and analytical findings. Candidate should frame this presentation like a talk presented at a sociology conference. The following offers a potential structure for the thesis overview presentation:
 - a. **Introduction:** statement of the research problem, research questions and hypothesis (if have one).
 - b. **Literature Review/Conceptual Framework:** highlights core theories and concepts from previous literature, which fills in gaps in knowledge and informs the analysis.
 - c. **Methods:** highlights methodological procedure and problems.
 - d. **Findings/Results:** presents core findings and highlights analytical arguments.
 - e. **Limitations:** addresses limitations of the study and ways to improve research on this topic in future studies.
 - f. **Conclusion:** summarizes main argument, addresses how the research question has been addressed, and discusses implications of study.
2. Committee begins asking questions, and the chair preferably defers to the committee to start, as the chair has heavily commented throughout the writing of the thesis. The chair comes in later to pose her/his questions (30-45 minutes).
3. After we have concluded this question/answer section, the chair asks the candidate to leave the room and the committee discusses the thesis and the defense performance. The chair could allow the committee to express how they want to proceed with revisions and with signing off on the thesis. Committee determines whether to require another review by committee before sign off or to delegate changes to chair's supervision and proceed with the signoff. The necessary revisions can be negotiated among the whole committee; the chair should both honor the committee's desire for additional revisions and advocate on behalf of the candidate, whose research history the chair is most familiar. Out of this conversation the chair should generate a list of agreed upon revisions from the committee's direction.
4. The chair asks the candidate to return to the room and shares with the candidate the committee's final decision on the oral exam. The chair also shares with the candidate the list of final revisions and process/timeline for changes so that the candidate can ask additional clarification questions about this list.
5. After the candidate successfully incorporates the chair and committee member's feedback and revisions, they will complete the CSUF Thesis/Dissertation Submission form found here: <http://www.fullerton.edu/graduate/academics/thesis.php> (click under "Submission" to find the link to the form), which includes uploading your final committee-approved

paper. This form can only be completed once and must be submitted by the appropriate deadline. Once you submit the CSUF Thesis/Dissertation Submission form, a Thesis Verification Form will be emailed to your committee for signatures.

6. The Committee will electronically sign the Thesis/Dissertation Verification form and the candidate will work with the Thesis Reader in Graduate Studies to prepare the thesis for formatting. After the Reader has approved all revisions so they meet the university standards, the Reader will submit the finalized version for publication.
7. Once the finalized thesis has been uploaded for publication, the student brings a bound copy of the thesis (but on regular paper) to the sociology main office. The Sociology Graduate Advisor can then send over the Completion Memo to Graduate Studies to designate that the candidate has completed all components of the program.
8. The thesis chair completes a grade change for Soci 598 from an RP to a letter grade, and the candidate's degree is then posted.