Wichita State University
Elliott School of Communication
Master’s Thesis Guidelines

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1. **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS SET OF GUIDELINES?**

   The objective of this document is to provide guidance for students who are considering whether to
undertake a Master’s thesis as part of their requirements for the M.A. Degree in Communication. It defines
the Master’s thesis and discusses how they can be beneficial to students. It includes information on the
planning, researching, writing and defense of a Master’s thesis for those who ultimately choose to do so. In
addition to the information provided here, anyone thinking of selecting the Master’s thesis option ought to
talk with his or her faculty advisor as early in their program as possible. Finally, students should read the
WSU Graduate School’s *Guide to the Preparation of Theses and Dissertations* online here:


2. **WHAT IS A MASTER’S THESIS?**

   Graduate students at the Elliott School of Communication may opt to write a Master’s thesis,
which is a written piece of work that is the culmination of a systematic study of a significant problem. A
thesis identifies a significant problem in the field of communication, states the major assumptions, explains
the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation.

3. Why Write a Master’s Thesis?

The thesis is the culmination of your graduate work and an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills you have acquired through your course work, as well as your internships or directed study. The thesis is intended as a guided, constructive learning experience. It is a chance for you to work in collaboration with a number of faculty members on a research project of mutual interest.

Students considering doctoral work normally choose to prepare a Master’s thesis. But even if you are not presently planning to go on for a doctorate, a thesis can help you build skills needed in the world of the communication professions. Besides becoming an expert in a topic of importance to those in the communication professions, you will improve your research, writing, analytical, and oral presentation skills through the thesis preparation process.

4. How Do I Get Started?

First, you should explore possible topics and areas of mutual interest through talking with faculty members and reading the relevant published literature. You may become interested in certain areas as a result of course topics or papers. Your advisor or other faculty members may describe research projects they are currently working on that you might be interested in. Thus, the initiation of ideas for possible theses can come from either the student or from faculty members. You should feel free to bounce ideas off various faculty, but you ought to keep your academic advisor appraised. Once agreement is reached, in principle, to pursue a specific topic, you are ready to proceed to the proposal and committee selection phase of the process.

Since most Master’s thesis timelines are quite short, it is important to start exploring and discussing possible topics as early as possible. If you select one early in your program, it may be possible to work on pieces of it in your coursework, which, in the end, will make the process go that much more smoothly when you begin the project in earnest.
5. **What’s in a Master’s Thesis?**

Not every Master’s thesis is organized in precisely the same way. To some extent, your research topic and the method(s) you select to answer your research question(s) will dictate the contents and organization of your thesis. For example, while some theses contain tables, graphs, charts, and appendices, many others do not. In addition, there are differences across communication studies, as well as the various related disciplines, in terms of what is contained in an acceptable thesis, and how one is organized. In many communication studies theses, however, there are similarities that come out of a common core of research traditions and purposes.


Not all thesis writers use the same methodologies as they set out to answer their research questions. You may, for example, opt to write a thesis that answers a question that lends itself to use of quantitative, or qualitative, methodologies. Or, you may decide to use more than one type of methodology in your thesis. The organization of your thesis into chapters will depend on your choice of topic, texts or artifacts for study, and methodology, among other things. You should consult early on in the thesis development process with your advisor for ideas on chapter organization. In addition, based on recommendations from their committee members, students should review excellent theses recently prepared by Elliott School students. Copies of such theses are available at Ablah Library and here: [http://soar.wichita.edu/handle/10057/351](http://soar.wichita.edu/handle/10057/351).


* A topic is chosen and narrowed to a specific research area. (thesis chapter 1)
* A specific research question is formulated. (thesis chapter 1)
* A comprehensive search of the literature is reviewed and reported (see Rubin, Rubin and Piele) in a well-written manner, grounded in theory, that explains and justifies the proposed research. (thesis chapter 1)
* The rigorous research methodology used in the study is explained (thesis chapter 2).
* The results are reported in a clear and cogent fashion (thesis chapter 3).
The findings are discussed, along with an explanation of the study’s contribution to the literature and implications for further research (thesis chapter 4).

A thesis that is based on a qualitative approach will possibly be organized differently than the above outline. A chapter outline used for a thesis using a qualitative rhetorical analytic method could consist of the following:

* An introductory chapter that includes a statement of the issues studied, a literature review, theoretical approaches, and a description of the artifacts used in the analysis.
* A second (or third or more) chapter(s) that include the analysis of the artifacts used in the study.
* A final chapter that discusses and concludes the study.

7. HOW LONG SHOULD THE PROCESS OF COMPLETING A THESIS TAKE?

Normally, a thesis is prepared the last year of a student’s program; it takes two semesters (COMM 875 for 3 hours in one semester, and COMM 876 for 3 more hours in the next or a subsequent semester). Because of the amount of work involved and the availability of faculty, summer session is usually not one of those semesters.

8. HOW MANY HOURS OF THEESIS CREDIT DOES A STUDENT TAKE?

Students must be enrolled for “thesis” credit each semester they receive direction from their thesis advisor, including the semester in which they defend the thesis. A maximum of six (6) thesis hours counts toward the MAC degree. For more information about thesis credit and the assigning of a grade for thesis hours at the satisfactory completion of the thesis, see the “Degree Program Regulations” section in the current Graduate Bulletin (e.g., Catalog).

9. HOW DOES A STUDENT GET A THESIS ADVISOR?

After first choosing a topic or subject of interest for the thesis, the student should talk to a MAC graduate faculty member who has expertise in that particular subject matter. The goal of such conversation should be the identification of an appropriate focus for a thesis and of a faculty member who agrees to serve as the thesis advisor and with whom the student is comfortable working.
10. **How does a student get a thesis committee?**

The student should consult with their thesis advisor to determine other potential graduate faculty members, one of whom must be from outside the Elliott School, to serve on the thesis committee (a total of three to five members). After the student and thesis advisor agree on these prospective members, the student contacts them to see if they are willing to serve. For more detailed information on the committee structure, see the “Degree Program Regulations” section on the Graduate School’s website [http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=gradschool&p=/degreecompletion/degreeregulations/](http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=gradschool&p=/degreecompletion/degreeregulations/).

11. **What is the usual procedure for working with the thesis advisor and the thesis committee?**

   a. In consultation with the thesis advisor, the student prepares a detailed Prospectus OR a draft of the first two chapters of the thesis (review of literature and methodology).

   b. With the prior consent of the thesis advisor, the student distributes that material to the other committee members.

   c. With the consent of the thesis advisor, the thesis committee is convened (no sooner than one week after members receive the materials) to discuss and give its approval to the thesis project. (An alternative procedure would be for the members to give individual feedback to the advisor and to the student, but a meeting is usually a better means of producing a common understanding).

   d. The student writes the rest of the thesis, chapter by chapter, in consultation with the thesis advisor. When each chapter is ready, it is given to the thesis advisor. The thesis advisor, in conversation with the student, determines whether chapters are submitted serially to the other committee members, or whether other committee members receive them only when the entire thesis is completed and ready for defense.

   e. The entire thesis, in final and perfected draft form, must be submitted to each committee member at least 10 days in advance of the defense of thesis, which must be scheduled officially and in advance by the Graduate School, at the request of the thesis advisor.

   f. The defense of the thesis must be scheduled enough in advance of the Graduate School deadline for reporting degree requirement completion to allow the student to:

      (1) make all necessary changes in the thesis required by the thesis committee;

      (2) have those changes confirmed and the perfected thesis approved by the thesis advisor; and
(3) deliver the three official copies of the thesis to according to the Graduate Schools rules
http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=gradschool&p=/degreecompletion/thesispreparation/.

NOTE: Steps a. – c. normally occur during the first semester of thesis enrollment in COMM 875,
and the rest of the steps in the subsequent semester(s) in COMM 876.

12. WHAT ARE THE FORMAT REQUIREMENTS FOR PREPARING THE THESIS?

The Graduate School requirements are specified in Guide to the Preparation of Theses and
Dissertations, available online

13. HOW MANY FINAL COPIES OF THE THESIS ARE NEEDED?

The Graduate School requires students to submit their thesis electronically through the Electronic
Thesis/Dissertation process explained here:
http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=gradschool&p=/degreecompletion/thesispreparation/. In addition, each thesis
committee member should be given a perfected copy of the thesis, either bound or electronically depending
on the preference of each member, at the same time as the electronic copies are submitted to the Grad
School.

14. WHAT ARE THE ACTUAL DATES FOR SATISFYING VARIOUS GRADUATE SCHOOL REQUIREMENTS?

They can be found in the “Academic Calendar” section of the Graduate Bulletin, or obtained from
the Graduate School.

15. WHAT WOULD CONSTITUTE PLAGIARISM IN A THESIS?

The work represented in the thesis must be the student’s own work. Plagiarism is a direct violation
of intellectual and academic honesty. Although it exists in many forms, all plagiarism boils down to the
unauthorized use of someone else’s words or ideas as one’s own. The most extreme forms of plagiarism are
the use of a piece of writing composed by another person or obtained from a commercial source, or use of
passages copied word for word from the work of other authors without acknowledgement. Paraphrasing
another author’s idea or quoting even limited portions of her or his text without proper citation is also an
act of plagiarism. Even putting someone else’s words into written form without acknowledgement is
plagiarism. In none of its forms can plagiarism be tolerated in an academic community.
16. What should I do if my research involves human subjects?

Federal law mandates that any research on a public university campus that involves human subjects must be reviewed and approved by the campus research office. For information, contact your thesis advisor.